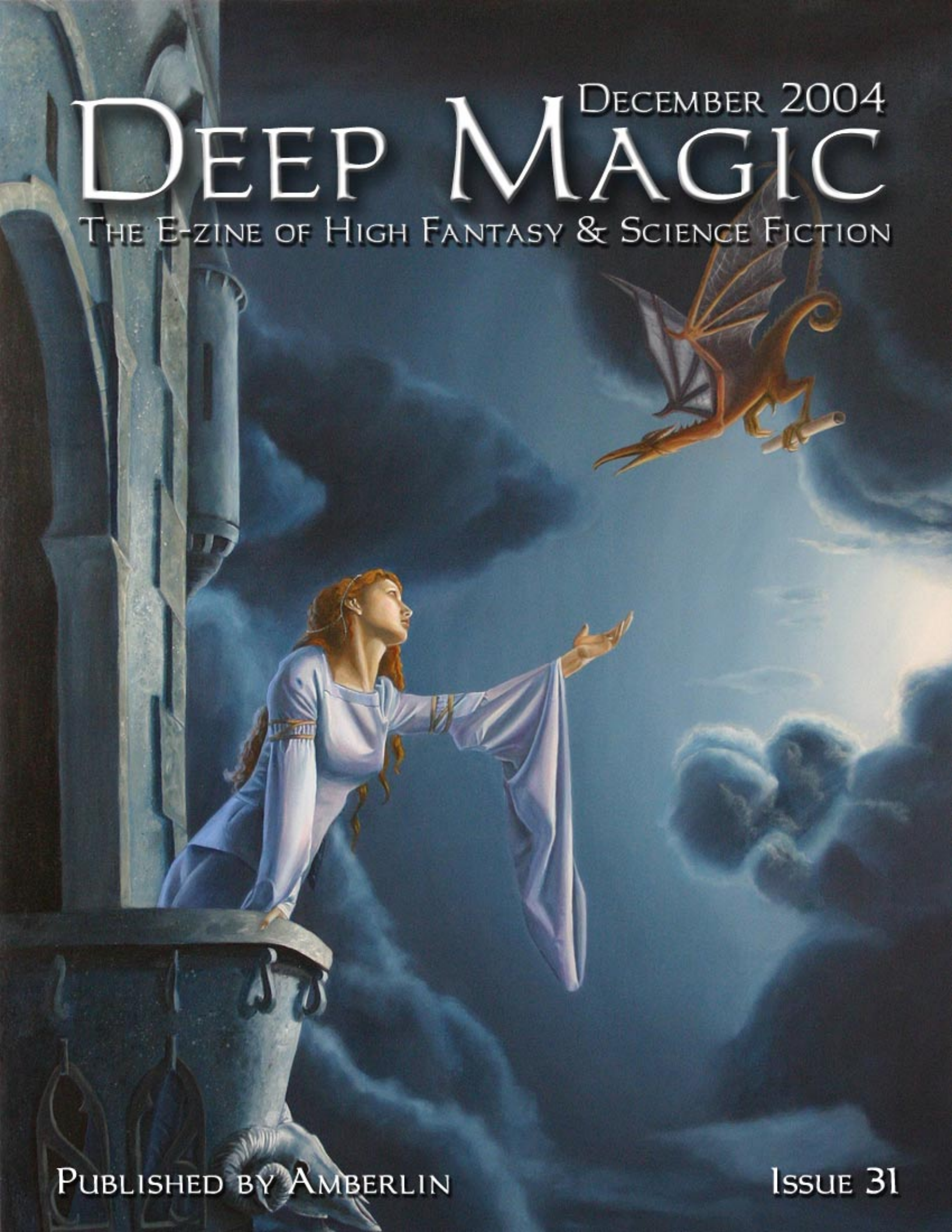
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# December 2004

December is one of my favorite months of the year. It's a time to look back at the year, spend time with our friends and family, and get cozy for another winter (well, for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere). It's a quiet month here at Deep Magic, and this issue is small, though still filled with good stories.

Looking back at this year, I am amazed and excited about what has happened at Deep Magic. After nearly having to close down the e-zine, our readers responded with donations that kept us afloat and helped us transition to a non-profit corporation (a transition that is still in process, though nearly complete). We launched our Kenatos world-building project, which has been greeted with enthusiasm by a number of readers. Staff member and techno-geek Steven Richards designed an incredible website to house Kenatos (as well as additional sites for our book reviews and writing craft articles). We have just published our second Anthology and *Silverkin*, Jeff Wheeler's sequel to *Landmoor*. Deep Magic is now available in a PDA version, thanks to Mike Loos. Our subscriber base has increased by thirty percent and continues to increase steadily every month. We have seen some great staff members move on to other projects, and we've added talented staff members who continue to help us expand our vision for Deep Magic. All in all, it has been a great year.

This month, we give you a light helping of Deep Magic, but one well worth the time. *Call of Blood* by Jonathan Ruland, *Crimson* by Michael Graves, and *The Golden Needle* by Vera Searles will all satisfy your Fantasy appetite for the month. We also present you with an article from Jeff Wheeler about his lunch with Fantasy author Terry Brooks, as well as the results of our recent Reader Survey.

So enjoy the December issue, and spend some time during the holidays with your loved ones. We'll still be here after the new year, thanks entirely to you, our readers.

All the best,
The Editors

## Safe Places for Minds to Wander

# Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

## December 2004 Writing Challenge Entries due January10, 2005

Love is in the air...or at least it will be by the time you are finished with this month's writing challenge. Our new format provides extra time for you to write and for us to review your submissions, but do not procrastinate. This challenge provides an additional benefit for those of us who might need an early reminder for Valentine's Day. Finally, if Wal Mart can put up Christmas decorations before Halloween, we can start talking and writing about romance at the start of December. You guessed it...since your submissions will be published in February, your challenge is to write a story of love and/or romance.

But, since when do we ever make it this easy on you? Not now. Most couples tell the story of how they met and fell in love countless times over the years. If the relationship turned sour or went down like the proverbial Titanic, those tales sound like forks on chalkboards to the party involved. So, here is the challenge: tell us the story of how two fantasy or science fiction characters (human, alien, or whatever you imagine) came together to form a relationship that changed the very stars above them, or at least the ones they saw when they first kissed. The twist is that the character hearing the story happens to be one of the romantics from the very story itself. How the character receives the tale of his or her romantic past is up to you–perhaps he is still in love and things only got better, perhaps she left him for a donkey-befriending ogre who lived in a swamp. The possibilities are endless.

We look forward to reading your tales of romance. Keep your submissions under 1000 words if possible, and remember that we are a safe place for children's minds to wander, so keep the graphic details in check.

## Selections from the October 2004 Writing Challenge

***Os'curtice and Se'pentice Sotanek***

The above stories were selected from the October challenge, which was to create a holiday/tradition for Kenatos.

## Don't forget the challenge due Dec 10:

*What gives a character depth? Some say it is conflict, others tension. A character is more than simple descriptions and mannerisms. To understand characters, we must see how their desires shape their lives. For this month's challenge, we would like you to invent a scene with a strong character. A good guy or bad guy, a good girl or bad girl, a throw-away character in a tavern, or the future hero of the next epic saga. You do not have to write a full story, but you can if inspired. Just write a scene where you can develop your character as best as you can. Develop this character by asking yourself these questions:*

1. *What does this character want?*
2. *What are his/her motives for wanting this?*
3. *How do we (the readers) learn what the character wants (dialogue, action, interior thoughts)?*
4. *What stands in the way of him/her achieving it?*
5. *What does that desire set in motion?*

*If you don't know the answers to these questions, the character will probably be rather shallow. The setting, of course, should be fantasy or science fiction.*

# Os'curtice and Se'pentice

## By Mike Loos

In the kingdom of Lydi, there are two major holidays each year. The first, named *Os'curtice*, heralds the arrival of midwinter, which itself marks the beginning of the Lydian year. The other, named *Se'pentice*, is celebrated at midsummer, the official midpoint of the Lydian calendar. Both holidays are integral to the halfling society. There are numerous reasons for their significance, but the most important may be the symmetry and balance they provide to the yearly cycle of a particularly analytical people. Even Lydians that live far from their homeland are drawn to these events, spawning great tales of raucous Os'curtice celebrations aboard far-flung Lydian sailing ships or of full-fledged Se'pentice festivals in the halfling enclaves along the distant southern shores. Lydians often journey far from home, but their traditions typically follow them wherever they go.

Os'curtice, literally *"darkest night"* in the old trading dialects, is a time of renewal for the Lydians, who wait anxiously through the winter for the return of warm winds and steady seas that power their great sailing vessels. Although often grounded in winter, the skillful and ingenious minds of the Lydians are definitely not idle in the colder months. Rather, the great inventors devote many candlelit nights and days pursuing innovations that they hope will ensure the dominance of their ships among the western trading fleets. The festivals of Os'curtice are often seen as a well-deserved break from their winter labors, as well as an indicator that the old year has passed and a new one has arrived.

Celebrations commemorating Os'curtice take many different forms among the various Lydian clans, though most involve great feasts of food and ale, along with dancing, singing, and general carousing. Os'curtice is a popular time for Lydians to marry, due to the fact that larger-than-normal numbers of the population are home from the sea during the winter months. Accordingly, many Lydian couples also celebrate their nuptial anniversaries on Os'curtice. Seemingly, a disproportionate number of birthday observances then occur around Se'pentice of the following year.

To the outside world, the most well-known Os'curtice festival occurs in the far northern regions where the Trystethen River marks the border between Lydi and the realm of the Silvandom elves. During most winters on the Trystethen, the river freezes solid along the narrower upstream sections, setting the stage for an intense competition known as the *Durcqua*. The Durcqua is a race featuring special wooden ships that have been designed to run along the ice. These ice-ships normally carry a crew of two, bearing large gaff rigged sails and reaching breathtaking speeds in the brisk winter breezes. For the Lydian shipwrights, it is a chance to showcase their engineering skills, often with large wagers and significant business relationships hanging in the balance. For spectators, the Durcqua is a thrilling event, pitting dozens of competitors against one another on a long and challenging course. Yearly, the Durcqua brings out the most experienced pilots and crews, inspiring the most ingenious advances in ship and sail design. It is not uncommon for fortunes to be won and lost in transactions conducted at the Durcqua, both among prominent Lydians as well as "spectators" that journey from as far away as Havenrook and Wayland to watch the great contest.

In contrast to the often unrestrained, party-like nature of Os'curtice, the observance of

Se'pentice at midyear is typically very reserved. Se'pentice, translated directly from old Lydian as *"the brightest dawn",* marks a holiday that recognizes the longest and warmest days of the year. For many clans, the arrival of Se'pentice is celebrated with large outdoor carnivals arrayed along the beaches adjoining the great shipyards. It is typically a time of homecomings, with many of the large fleets returning at that time from trading missions to foreign lands. The greatest Se'pentice tradition is the raising of large towers decorated by schoolchildren to welcome ships home from the sea. For Lydian sailors who left new brides at home in the early springtime, a significant sign of good fortune is that their wives gave birth to their first child while they were away. In later years, that same child will welcome his or her father home with bright flags tied to the Se'pentice towers, and one day even recognize those same landmarks upon their own homecomings.

For Lydians, the arrival of Se'pentice is an indicator that calm summer conditions will eventually be replaced by stormy seas and cold winds that will relegate all but their largest and most rugged vessels to port. The passage of midsummer stirs most of the great traders to exchange their current goods quickly so that they might launch one more run to the far western islands or mount a longer expedition to explore the uncharted southern seas. As Os'curtice harkens the beauty of spring and the arrival of Se'pentice, all Lydians understand that the passing of Se'pentice signals the stark majesty of fall and the dark night of Os'curtice. Two holidays, arrayed on opposite ends of the year, supporting a cycle without end. These events have framed Lydian existence for generations.

**Author's Note:** My initial idea for this submission was actually a full short story concerning the northern Os'curtice festival and the Durcqua, but I wasn't confident that I would complete that story in time for the 10th. So I decided to play it safe and address the challenge directly with this shorter background piece. If this gets published, I'll try to finish the longer story and submit it for a future issue.

# Sotanek

## By A.M. Stickel

Declaring it ill luck to commemorate Kenatos by name, our Silvan King, Davtian, reversed it to "Sotanek,"and made it the holiday beginning each year. This followed his triumph at the Battle of Actiask. Thus, on a certain day, my companions and I found ourselves riding out of Silvandom to that city wherein are preserved all the land's treasured history and knowledge.

The close of that year, the 13th after the fateful founding, would open that which held the day of Davtian's death in the Fourth Plague. Had we known, our Sotanek carousing might not have been so lively. In the full bloom of youth at a time of peace, we looked forward to the hard-won promise of better days. That Sotanek I recall not so much for the bitter time that soon followed, but for the brief sweetness its brightest moments held.

As befitted Davtian's heroic Silvan warriors, we wore our gayest apparel of green tunics and yellow leggings, bright blue ribbons streaming from our elbows and braided hair, crimson capes billowing. Davtian was royally clad in purple. Singing, we rode forth from Silvandom on spirited, gold-maned steeds with Davtian in our midst. Along the way we passed groups of drab and somber druids plodding toward Kenatos, or resting in communion with nature beneath the leafless trees. Red-nosed, rosy-cheeked village children pelted us and each other with snowballs, eliciting much laughter on both our parts. With shouts of "Felicitous Sotanek!" we threw them gauze-wrapped honey cakes.

Nearing Kenatos, our songs died when we noticed a strange mist rising from the city's moat. Our hands went to blade or bow in alarm.

But Davtian only laughed and declared, "I see the Wizard Forrind's fine hand in this. So keep yours from your weapons."

We had become almost as nervous as the black-robed priests of Seitherell, who were not much in evidence since the murder of their Arch-Rike preceding Actiask by a year. Those few we saw raised their right hands and made the circle of blessing. We returned their blessings in reverse with our left hands, except for Omyno, who had lost his in battle. He would nod to them instead.

The moat proved to be frozen over. Upon its surface glided scores of odd creatures on wooden skates, so many that their combined exhalations became a cloud of mist. Thanks to Forrind's magic, from the knees up, noisy little girls glimmered in the guises of child-sized bees, birds and butterflies, while the equally raucous lads wore the likenesses of bears, deer, and wolves. Watchful elders glided among them in the shapes of trees, striving, but usually failing, to prevent the inevitable collisions among their wildlings.

We entered the city to pealing bells, their many tones ringing out in merry welcome through the crisp clean air. The snowy, cobbled, central byways had been scoured and sanded by crews of menials in anticipation of our arrival. Horse-drawn sleighs swooshed by on lesser streets, pausing to release their passengers into the masked throng of costumed revelers. They welcomed us among their number with trays of mouth-watering dainties and cups of hot cider. Toddlers begged for short rides with us, or were held up for good luck busses on their chubby faces. We graciously obliged them.

Maidens of every race and rank—comely and cozy in pastel winter bonnets, knitted gloves,

and warm capes—leaned shyly over balustrades or peeped from windows, often throwing us kisses. Their jealous swains no doubt watched from among the crowd, their disapproving scowls hidden behind their masks. What else could they do, those untried youths? We were the darlings and dandies of the day.

At the heart of the city, we found the fountain before the Great Hall frozen, the play of light changing its ice to gleaming jewels. Perched grinning on its rim, clad in flowing white robes which matched his hair and beard, was Davtian's old friend, the Wizard Forrind. His pink cheeks and smooth skin belied his age. His mischievous wink stole the stage from his dignity. Davtian dismounted and took Forrind by the hand to help him rise.

"What further boon will you ask of me to end this year, Davtian? Anything within my power I will grant you, even safe haven from what might hinder your life in the coming year."

"You have, as always, outdone yourself, Forrind. It warms my heart to see the people so happy. I should be ashamed to ask more of you beyond this wonderland, but ask I will. For there is something I value more than my own safety for another year." Davtian turned to our company, his green gaze lingering on Omyno. Forrind's fathomless blue eyes followed his gaze.

"Consider it done, my King," the Wizard replied, his usually sonorous voice softening to a whisper. Then Forrind broke an icicle from among those lining the fountain's rim. Swiftly, he hurled it at Omyno's left wrist stump.

Speared by the ice in his old wound, Omyno gasped in pain, and could not stifle a sob. The crowd around us joined in our amazement, for there was no blood. Instead, from our comrade's left sleeve an icy hand grew. Then, ever so slowly, it changed to flesh. Omyno's lost hand had saved Davtian's life at Actiask. In the true spirit of Sotanek, Davtian, by restoring one of us through Forrind's hand, had gifted all of us. And that has always been my sweetest memory these many years. I try to live as if I believe its message....

# Call of Blood

## By Jonathan Ruland

She sat wrapped in her cloak, arms folded beneath her breasts and wisps of dark hair dancing about her face in the chill autumn wind. Her mouth was twisted in that pout of hers, and her blue eyes were dark. She was beautiful, the woman who had saved him.

"This had better be worth it, Darev," she said for the hundredth time. "Five days in the cold wind on this rocky path you told me was a road!" A great gust rushed against them, plastering her cloak to her body. She squeezed her eyes shut until the wind died. Opening them, she glared, her mouth twisted into a scowl.

"It *is* worth it, Merria," he said.

"Couldn't you find a better way to get to Merroll Valley?"

They could have gone around, it was true, but it would have taken at least twice as many days. And if they had gone that way, she would have complained it was taking too long. At least Star, their packhorse, didn't seem to mind at all as he stood chomping away in his feedbag. But then he didn't have much to pull either; the small cart that carried their possessions wasn't even half full. At least they had their lives, and at least they had each other.

**Another gust hit Darev, and he gritted his teeth, looking up at the gray, dreary mountaintops where snow clouds were forming. He would get a proper tongue-lashing tonight, he was sure.**

Another gust hit Darev, and he gritted his teeth, looking up at the gray, dreary mountaintops where snow clouds were forming. He would get a proper tongue-lashing tonight, he was sure. Just two weeks after their wedding and all they did was fight. If only he could cheer her up a bit...

He reached out and touched her cheek.

Merria slapped his hand away, hard.

"Ouch!" he said, nursing his injured hand.

"You deserve it."

"For what?" He reached for her again.

She slapped his hand again and glared into his eyes. "For talking me into this."

"We had to go somewhere."

"But you said this way would be easy!" She slapped his arm. It stung. He hadn't even reached for her this time. "You said, 'Merria, Merroll Valley's where we can make our life together and get away from all this. Everything will be fine once we get there!'" She hit him with her other hand. "You made it sound so easy!" She hit him again. And again.

"We didn't have time to think of anything else! The king wanted me back and he would've–stop it!" He grabbed her shoulders, pinning her arms to her sides. Her eyes blazed with defiance just inches from his face, and her cheeks flushed. The chill breeze danced little wisps of her silky black hair before his eyes.

He couldn't resist any longer. He pulled her lips to his.

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# Featured Artist
## Krystal Camprubi

**Name:** Krystal Camprubi
**Age:** 27
**Residence:** Nancy, France.
**Children:** None.
**Hobbies:** Reading, playing instruments (harp and piano), singing, fencing, designing and sewing clothes, and horseback riding.
**Personal Quote:** The heart lives what it believes.
**Favorite Book or Author:** The Lord of the Rings by Tolkien; Alexandre Dumas.
**Started Painting In:** Painting is my first love. I have always painted for my own pleasure, first with tempera and afterwards with oils. However, I have only been a professional illustrator and painter since January 2003.
**Artist Most Inspired By:** My favourite artists who work with oils are Waterhouse, Vermeer, or the contemporary artists Christophe Vacher, Donato Giancola, and Siudmak. As for watercolor artists, I prefer Brian Froud, Alan Lee and John Howe.
**Media You Work In**: I mostly work with oils (older style techniques). I also like to cook my own oils and prepare my own canvasses. It's a little bit of paint chemistry!
**Schools Attended:** High School of Music of Paris (for piano) at the same time I attended college, where I studied Medieval Literature and Celtic Fantasy.
**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:** Currently, it is mostly displayed in Belgium and France. I'm a young illustrator, so there are many projects pending and in my future.
**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:** To purchase my merchandise: www.krystal-camprubi.com. To purchase original paintings of mine or to contact me professionally, please email me directly at this address: contact@krystal-camprubi.com.
**Website URL**: www.krystal-camprubi.com.

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**
A: That's a funny story because it's a little unusual. I began with studies in Literature and Music. I always had a strong desire to have a career in Art, because it

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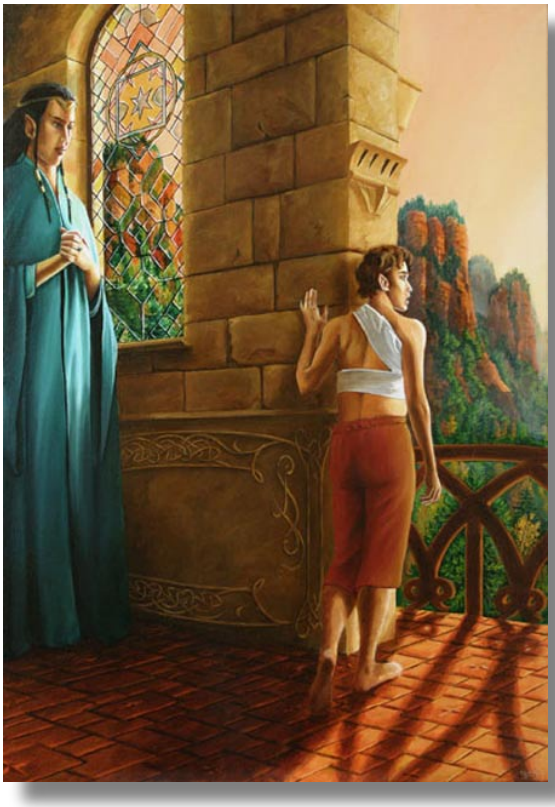


was always an omnipresent passion of mine, but I didn't think it would be possible to do it as a profession. Until the day when I met one of my favourite artists, Wojtek Siudmak, to whom I showed my portfolio. He strongly encouraged me to become a professional painter. The road in illustration was a natural calling for me because of my passion for Tolkien. For years I lived in the University of "the Lord of the Rings" with artists as prestigious as Alan Lee, John Howe and Ted Nasmith. I therefore left everything to paint, and today I do not regret it at all.

**Q: How would you describe your work?**

A: First of all, it's a Fantasy Realist World. I try my best to create a realistic ambiance where the viewer has the impression of going behind the painting. I like that paintings are a window that opens to the world inside. Aside from the technical aspects, I believe that they have an air of femininity. I like the poetry of attitudes and the gracious expressions. People often say that my characters have a sad aura about them. I cannot keep myself from thinking of the nostalgia that Tolkien creates when he describes his elves. I believe that a very deep image cannot help but seem nostalgic, and that is no doubt why this transpires in many of my paintings. As if my characters have this in them.

**Q: Where do you find your inspiration?**

A: It is a long process. More often than not, ideas come to me while I'm falling asleep, right before I fall into dreams. Other times, it is inspired by the little moments in life that come to me on a daily basis, like scenery that I see or the setting of the sun. Life is full of gifts for those who wish to observe attentively. Finally, often enough my inspiration comes from movies, other paintings or lectures. While watching a movie, I might notice a painting or the scenery, and these might give me a grain of an idea. Often a painting is created indirectly with two ideas that come from different sources of inspiration. They finish by fusing together and ripening with time to become a project completely personal and unique. For me, each painting is born in its own hour. If I try and force the process, the painting becomes artificial and doesn't breathe on its own. It doesn't express anything. There are things that are greater than the artist when he/she paints.

**Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)**

A: There are many elements that inspired this image. First is my passion for old Gothic Cathedrals, gargoyles, and my fascination with the spiral shaped horns of the ram that are found clearly in the ornamental pieces of the castle. They have a strangeness that brings me into the universe of Brian Froud. We already find his influences in the painting *Notre Dame des Engoulevents*. I tend to draw many characters with horns, which make them half animal, and if the horns resemble branches, half plant.

First, I wanted to create an image that had a menacing, dark surrounding, touching on witchery and obscure magic, and that afterward we realize that it wasn't exactly that at all. The

continued on next page

main character, in effect, offers a much different feeling. It's a good magician, a woman from the past. However, because she is represented in this environment, an air of mystery is added to the portrait.

As for the dragon, that is a very long story. I tried, in order to render my images more credible, to come as close as possible to the existing schema. I watch the movements of animals. From this point of view, it seemed to me illogical to represent a dragon that would have four paws and two wings. The wings take the place of the paws. Since tradition does not go in this direction, I promised myself that I would create a dragon in this manner, and I was quick to see that it would be the perfect medium for this woman. To offer the secrets that she seems to be imagining.

**Q: What do you consider your influences?**

A: With the technical aspect of painting, I have always admired greatly the historical painters like Vermeer or Rembrandt. They are chemists of light, whereas this is an element of painting that has fascinated me the most. Their influence is evident in my paintings, because I often use images of light that are contrasted and clear. They easily develop a fantastic ambiance. On the character level, my influences have been painters like Waterhouse. The women I represent have no doubt inherited their archetype from the delicate, ambiguous, helpless woman. Presently, I have begun to evolve with the help of other influences who are not necessarily oil painters. I am thinking of talented illustrators like Alan Lee. Their vision has encouraged me to paint on a larger scale, in a more open setting, but also to leave more and more fluid areas as that in watercolors. This allows the imagination to have free rein in the painting.

**Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**

A: Because I am still a young illustrator, each new step for me is a success and a gift. I wouldn't know what to say was the most successful venture at present. Returning from galleries, my first invitation to a Fantasy Festival, to my first solicitation outside of the French frontier, to my first cover or my first dedications. I am actually in the middle of preparing a Tolkien calendar with a colleague who has already worked with the Tolkien Enterprise. Given my passion for Tolkien for so many years, and the way he has influenced my life and my methods of art, this project will no doubt be the one I will be most proud of.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?**

A: I am not certain to have a sufficient enough step backwards to be able to approach this question with objectivity, but the following is my opinion: A few decades ago, Science Fiction and Fantasy were considered the same style "Literature of the Imagination." For many people, it was unfortunately a sub-literature. With Tolkien things began to change. Science Fiction and Fantasy became more distinct and in their own categories. Inevitably, we finished by trying to push etiquettes on certain styles in order to force them into one or the other category. For me, it consists of something artificial because the imagination can touch on so many frontiers. I have the impression that certain authors fight against these restrictions and create their work coming from one point or another. Elements that we believe to belong to Fantasy and others we attribute to Science Fiction are slowly integrating into the other and enriching each in its own way.

I am happy to say that more and more I'm finding an increased interest in literary imagination. It's only been a short time since there have been serious studies offered by our universities.

# Crimson
## By Michael Graves

*Blood soaked the sheets, puddled on the floor, patterned the walls. Blood everywhere. Red gloves on his shaking hands, soaking his leggings, smearing his cheeks. It misted his eyes with a red haze as he left the room, three faces staring after him in unseeing accusation.*

He woke as he always did, in a cold sweat, the faces burned into his memory. Every night the same dream haunted him. It would doubtless haunt him every night of what passed for his life until he exorcised the demon. That time was close now, the final act of a ten-year tragedy about to be played out. Tossing aside the soaked sheets, he rose, bathed himself in cold water and dressed. It was still dark as he left his room to stalk the torch-lit corridors. Aside from servants he was the first to wake. He always was, his insomnia merely part of the legend surrounding his name. He spent the lonely hours before dawn leaning on the battlements, staring out across the fields, his thoughts darker than the moonlit night.

Finally, as the red glow of the rising sun began to burn the horizon, he abandoned his vigil and strode towards the throne room.

As he swung the doors closed behind him, boot heels striking echoes from the marble floor, the buzz of early morning conversation died away to a cacophony of whispers. Heads turned to follow him, eyes careful not to meet his gaze as he took up his station at the King's right hand. It was always thus, the conversation gradually returning to normal as he settled into the background of court affairs. His eyes held no expression as they scanned the faces of those thronging the court, alert for any sign of trouble. Most of those gathered were known to him; courtiers, guards, ambassadors, merchants and petitioners. Only one face was unfamiliar. A young woman in a pale blue dress and simple cloak of white wool stood chatting with one of the court gossips. From the way her eyes kept flicking in his direction he guessed that he was the topic of their conversation. No doubt the courtier was filling her head with tales of the King's Crimson Terror. He sniffed in disdain at the thought. The tales, gossip and reputation he had attracted mattered little to him. He studied the woman for several heartbeats longer than usual. She was little more than a girl really, pale oval face framed by a cascade of honey-blonde hair. Yet there was an indefinable something about her that held his interest. She shook her head at something the courtier said, and the movement broke the moment. He returned his attention to his duty, once more scanning the crowd for potential trouble. Only once before had his attention slipped, putting the King's life in momentary peril.

**Heads turned to follow him, eyes careful not to meet his gaze as he took up his station at the King's right hand. It was always thus, the conversation gradually returning to normal as he settled into the background of court affairs.**

* * *

continued on page 36

# Lunch with Terry Brooks

## By Jeff Wheeler

It's not everyday that you get to have lunch with your favorite author. But there we were at the cafe annex at Book Passage in Corte Madera, California, on a Saturday afternoon, eating cold turkey sandwiches and talking about his writing. We even discussed plot points for my latest series of novels, and all the while, I tried not to dribble salad dressing on my pants. Lunch lasted about fifteen minutes, but it was worth it. It made for a great title to this article.

How can you top an experience like that? Quite simple. I spent about eight hours with the author of the Shannara world on a Saturday in October. I had previously discovered that Mr. Brooks would be in Corte Madera at a book signing followed by a writing seminar. So for a nominal fee, I could have my favorite author read some of my writing, offer his insight and feedback, and lecture about the craft of writing speculative fiction. How could I say no to that? After class, I asked if I could share what I learned with the readers of Deep Magic. He remembered us, actually, from when we requested permission to re-print a chapter from his memoirs, *Sometimes the Magic Works*. He graciously granted his permission to share the following.

**The life of a writer is not easy. One of the things Terry said about that really struck me. If you do not write because the act itself brings you joy, then find an easier hobby.**

The life of a writer is not easy. One of the things Terry said about that really struck me. If you do not write because the act itself brings you joy, then find an easier hobby. If your sense of self-fulfillment and pride in your work will only be satisfied by becoming a bestselling author, then you had better quit and find another way to fame. Writing is like bricklaying, framing houses, or laying tile. It's often tedious, requires a lot of practice and patience, and frankly is a lot of hard work. Building a sense of repetition is crucial to forming the habits necessary to be a good writer. Terry suggested setting aside some writing time, every day or every other day—time that is protected and treated like a sanctuary. The when and the where don't really matter. It is the repetition of putting words to a page that will make your writing improve. He quoted Asimov, who said a writer should start out by writing a million words. Then that writer will be ready to learn to be an author.

Terry's second tip was just as simple and thought provoking. Read. Read, read, read. Lots of reading. And not just fantasy and science fiction. One of his biggest influences is William Faulkner, not Tolkien or Lewis. In a way, the genre found him, not vice versa. Other authors, especially those outside the genre, have plenty to teach you. They will open your mind to new ways of conceiving stories and crafting them. Take time to read. Lots of it.

After these introductory words, Terry set the framework for the next portion of class. Beforehand, we were all asked to submit two things: a 250-word synopsis of a book idea we had and the first five pages of that story. We began with the synopsis, but on a white board in the front of our small classroom tucked away inside Book Passage, he wrote the following with a

squeaky marker:

**Protagonist**
**Antagonist**
**Central Conflict**
**Story Arc**

Terry then proceeded to read aloud each synopsis, and we took time to discuss each one framed by these four elements. Since fantasy and science fiction are category fiction, these four elements need to be present. Who is the protagonist—the hero of the story? Has the antagonist been defined? Who is he or she? We then tried to distill the central conflict of each story. What was the big problem, and how did it relate to the protagonist and the antagonist? And finally, what was the story arc—meaning, how does the story get from point A to point B? And would that be a compelling journey?

This is the part when the pain started. One of my classmates, the first to have her synopsis eviscerated by Terry, described the experience to me as "having my fingernails ripped out one by one." It was painful because during the process, the class members all realized that they were missing one or more of these elements.

**Protagonist**

Under the protagonist topic, Mr. Brooks noted several common pitfalls. Many main characters cannot withstand a little scrutiny, let alone searing scrutiny. They must be able to. For example, why would a teenage priestess who alone survived the massacre of her people be capable of stopping a madman tyrant? Why was she chosen? What qualifies her for the task? Why would a pizza delivery girl be the one to stop a secret conglomerate with the technology to halt aging? Terry suggested a stark rule: "never put anything in for which you do not have an explanation." If your synopsis or character study can't survive a pitchfork attack, then why bother writing a novel that will shred under a cynical reader's eye?

Terry also offered some interesting advice about character development as well under this topic. A character's strength can come from simple sources (such as faith). They must earn the outcome, instead of having it handed to them by an all-powerful god, a technology savvy scientist, or a rogue Jedi knight. This is called a *deus ex machina* ending, where an all-powerful source rescues the protagonist from his problems at the end instead of the protagonist finding a way to figure it out.

**Antagonist**

Quite simply, they are the villains in your world, but especially a key villain. The antagonist is what helps add the human drama to fiction. It is the Darth Vader character, the person who plays counterpoint to the protagonist; the person who causes problems for the protagonist and is possibly the cause or a component of the central conflict itself. Something I found interesting from the class is that many of the plot synopses did not have concrete antagonists. They were typically a government conspiracy, an evil overlord, or an all-powerful wizard who is heard about

but rarely seen. I'm not saying that a fantasy world cannot have this, but the true antagonist is much closer to the main character than this. Perhaps it's an underling of the Evil Overlord who hates the hero—someone who gets in his or her face, making their lives miserable. Good stories have them. Weaker stories neglect them or leave them out completely. This is an element that adds to the drama of any story. It certainly made me look back at my stories to see where my antagonists were and what roles they played.

**Central Conflict**

This is the component of the story that shows what the hero is up against, and it is also another crucial place where mistakes are made. Terry said, "Speculative fiction must mirror truths in the real world." That is one of the elements that makes a story so compelling for readers. We see pieces of ourselves, our struggles or inadequacies, reflected in this genre. So the plot is not about how a technology allows space ships to jump across the galaxy in a single blip. It's about how the side effects make someone nearly crash their speeder, have hallucinations, or destroy a relationship. The central conflict must speak to the reader, find a part of their soul, and hook into it. Let me reiterate the crucial element that is often neglected (and painfully so). The protagonist must be the one to resolve the central conflict. It was Frodo who made it the edge of Mount Doom, not Gandalf.

This is also the opportunity to talk about magic, or technology, depending on what you are writing. Magic is the hallmark of the fantasy genre. Terry advised that magic needs to have an identifiable source and behavior and that less is more. Magic should never be all-powerful. That is boring. I've mentioned before that my favorite Terry Brooks novel is *Elfstones of Shannara*. The Elfstones are a powerful magic that can destroy just about anything. But the protagonist, Wil Ohmsford, has trouble the entire book being able to control them. During some moments, he can summon their magic. At other life-threatening times, the magic fails him. This erratic behavior, which is fully explained by the end of the novel, offers great tension throughout the book.

**Story Arc**

Every story begins and ends, but only good stories begin and end well. Terry said the story arc gets the reader from point A to point B. The greatest danger here is a six-letter word—*boredom*. Actually, it is seven letters, but I wanted to test to see if you were counting. One of the powerful things about writing a 250-word synopsis of a novel is the need to be concise—to boil down the elements to an explainable level. That exercise is helpful to see if you have enough (or too much) material to create a story. Terry explained that "action is used to move the plot forward or illuminate a character." Action for any other reason is superfluous. A story is crafted in several layers, though. The "text" of the story is the surface story. Frodo and his pal Sam take a long walk to Mordor. The "subtext" is the layer beneath and often what appeals unconsciously to the reader. It can be the notion that one man (or one Hobbit) truly can make a difference. Understanding both layers is important to achieve the purpose of your story. In a way, each book tells multiple stories.

Characters are what readers live for and whom they relate to. In addition to your protagonist

and antagonist, there is usually a cast that helps drive the plot towards the resolution of the conflict. One of the things I noticed from the writing samples, and that Terry also mentioned, is that writers rely so much on physical descriptions to establish characters: *Joe the Barbarian walked into the arena with brown hair, blue eyes, and smelly socks. Cindy the Sorceress had long wavy red hair, green eyes, and a smile that melted the hearts of all the Orcs in Netherwindell.* This is also a problem in creating a setting: *the Empire of Kalackitazamasknan has fourteen arch-dukes who wear red ribbons, sixteen arch-marquis who wear yellow ribbons, fourteen dolcers, twelve fennels, and eight pidges who all wear purple. They eat spam casserole on Sumperfeast Day and sell turnips to the Bruces of Scutlind every leap year.* Details like this can drown a reader, lead to dreaded boredom, and cause your book to be hurled against a wall. Terry said that "seventy-five percent of what you know won't come into the story at all." That amazed me but rang true. I've read J.K. Rowling interviews where she says the same thing. She has documented things about Hogwarts that will never be put into a book. The whole purpose is for her to create order in her universe in order to tell the story of Harry Potter. Terry's advice for characters was just as interesting. "March the characters around in your head a while" before you start writing them. In fact, he said to look at how they walk instead of how they are dressed or their hair color. Become acquainted with them so intimately that you know what they eat for lunch on Sumperfeast Day. But you don't have to say it's spam casserole just because you know it.

**After lunch**

After our dizzyingly delicious turkey sandwiches, the members of our writing seminar reconvened with no fingernails left, so Terry got to work on our toenails. He had previously read the first five pages of the stories we submitted and was ready to offer his gems of insight. Since the gems appeared in context to the writing samples, they may seem a bit disjointed here, but here they are anyway.

**Gem#1:** One of three things needs to happen in a story in the first few pages. (A) Reader meets the Protagonist. (B) Reader meets Antagonist. (C) Reader introduced to the Central Conflict. This is a multiple-choice test with no correct answer. But one (or more) of these elements needs to be there. One of the mistakes seen in the writing samples was the flaw of shifting point of view from one character to another in short order. The first five pages is crucial to hooking a reader's interest, so don't chop it up into short sections canvassing different points of view. Stay with one character, preferably (A) or (B), and offer the reader a flavor of what is going on.

**Gem#2:** If it's hard to write, write it. Authors sometimes shy away from writing difficult scenes. That's all the more reason to do it. Be brave and bold. Write from your heart.

**Gem#3:** Things tend to work better in dialogue with *movement*. There is more energy in a scene when two characters are discussing something while engaged in some activity (chopping wood, casting a spell, brewing tea, raking leaves…be creative). If the world stops so they can have a conversation, it tends to create boredom. Spice up the dialogue tags to make it happen.

"What brings a nice sorceress like you to a hovel like this?" Rudy the Orc said while chopping parsley with his butcher axe and scattering the flecks in a wooden bowl. "Could you hand me a turnip please? Over there, by the pickles."

**Gem#4:** Involve all the senses. To create a world, you must do so through sensory information. What do the characters see, smell, hear, feel, taste?

**Gem#5:** Titles serve two purposes. (1) They readily identify the genre of the story. (2) They say something about the content. In reality, the title is primarily determined by the marketing department of most publishing houses. The reason for this is they are the ones who approach booksellers and know the power of a title. The last thing you would want is a fantasy titled *Gnomes* to end up in the home and garden section of a bookstore.

**Gem#6:** Teach yourself to be your own editor. Most of the major fantasy and sci-fi authors out there did not have someone handholding them or teaching them the tricks of the trade. No one will help you, either. You learn how to do this by doing it and practicing it. Self-editing is a skill you need to develop. Work on it.

**Wrap-Up**

After Terry had finished critiquing our work, we had about an hour left in class for open questions and answers. I took this as an opportunity to treat it like an interview and fired away with questions. We discussed outlining and why Terry is so passionate about it. He said that he usually outlines his books in advance by writing one paragraph per chapter. Some paragraphs are a single sentence, others are six or seven. That helps him tighten his plotting, make sure the story arc is stable, and strategize character development. Then he begins to write. At some point during the process, he "knows the book is crap." I loved hearing this, because it rang so true to me and to what I've heard other authors say about works in progress. That feeling always leaves, and during the journey, he discovers what the book is really about. Writing is a journey of discovery for him. And it does not end the way he envisioned in the beginning.

We also discussed perceiving your own work objectively. As an author, you cannot read it in the same way a new reader does. Terry has refined this ability to the point where he can leave it overnight, or walk away from it for a few days, and come back and see it more clearly. He trusts his instincts, but sometimes they need to be reined in. Agonizing over a work, especially for beginning writers, is a good thing. It forces you to be critical.

He shared a story with the class that was especially inspiring. In one of his previous classes, he met an aspiring author whose writing was terrible. But the fellow persevered, working on his craft and improving. Finally it was ready and Terry recommended him to an agent. The agent bought the book but afterwards shared something. At the time he made the decision to accept it, another manuscript was on his desk that was better—more professional and more polished. But it didn't have any *heart*. Which led Terry to say, "If you're not *passionate* about what you're working on, editors will feel it. Go out on a limb with your emotions." Editors will feel that. And that is the reason the new author's book was accepted.

Next I asked what success looked like as a fantasy author. When can one quit the day job to

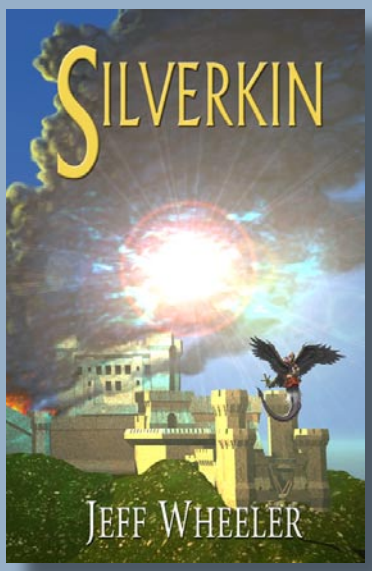
be a writer? His answer was wry and truthful. Most authors can't quit their day jobs. They just do not make enough to live on. Writing full time rarely pays a living wage. To put it in context, a fantasy hardcover that sells 30,000 copies is a great success. Royalties are 10-12%, so you can do the math if you guess how much hardcopies sell for. Next imagine how many copies J.K. Rowling sells and you will see why she's richer than the Queen of England. If 30,000 copies is a great success, then the average selling rate is 5,000 to 12,000 copies. Again, you can do the math. And the agent gets 15% of the author's profits.

The experience was well worth the cost. Not only did I get to listen to a master of fiction share his advice and industry experience, I got to talk to him about one of my writing projects during the course of the day and during a brief lunch visit. I left Corte Madera with my fingernails still on—which was encouraging—along with suggestions for how I could make things better. That's the point, after all, for working on anything.

# The End

**Looking for a way to support Deep Magic? Tell your friends about our books! All of them can be purchased at Amazon.com and other online retailers by clicking on their covers.**

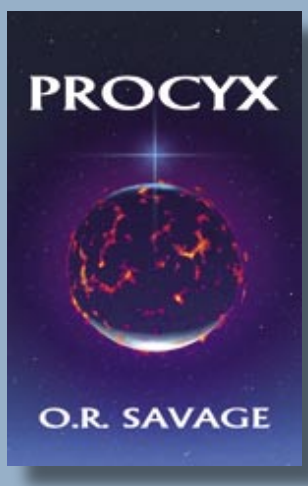
Announcing two new Amberlin Books releases! *Silverkin*, sequel to *Landmoor*, is written by Jeff Wheeler and completes the Landmoor Duology. *Deeper Magic: The Second Collection* contains selected short stories from our second year of publication. Both books are through Amazon.com and other online retailers. Click the cover images to order the books from Amazon.com.



**Silverkin**
The anticipated sequel to Landmoor has finally arrived, continuing the adventures of Thealos Quickfellow.

**Deeper Magic:**
The next collection of short stories compiled from the second year of Deep Magic.

Other publications released by Amberlin Books (click the covers to order).



AMBERLIN BOOKS

# The Golden Needle

## By Vera Searles

Once upon a time there was a young seamstress named Libetta who worked in the House of High Sorcerers. Along with three other maidens of like age, she toiled each day at the sewing table in the topmost tower room, where sunshine flooded through the tall windows to give light for making tiny stitches.

From dawn to dusk the four maids fashioned the clothing of the magicians: long smocks, tunics, robes, wide cloaks, and pantaloons. Into the voluminous folds and pleats they sewed secret pockets for the concealment of the implements of magic: charms, ribbons, coins, wands, rings, and so forth. No High Sorcerer ever went about his or her daily routine without a full supply.

Libetta's favorite High Sorceress was the Lady of Good Spells, who had golden eyes and delicate, gentle hands. When she came each day to examine the stitchery, she paused at Libetta's chair to finger the tucks and pleats of the girl's handiwork. Often she had a word of praise. "Nicely done, Libetta. Your stitches are tight and even."

The Lady's smile was like silk where it fell on Libetta's skin, and the seamstress knew it was laid upon her as a gift in the form of a spell, for all of Libetta's worldly cares dwindled away. When she dreamed that night, she saw herself in the Garden of Enchantment, with a handsome prince at her side.

**When she came each day to examine the stitchery, she paused at Libetta's chair to finger the tucks and pleats of the girl's handiwork. Often she had a word of praise.**

The Lady went on to the other three, Thella, Joralee, and Yeve, but seldom spoke praise to them. When she left, the other maidens giggled and teased Libetta, calling her Lady's pet. But Libetta knew it was a false compliment, for she saw the three were covering pangs of jealousy.

Every evening, after the day's work was completed, the page came to the tower room and paid each maid five kimmix. Then Libetta walked from the city for a mile along the rough roads to her farmland home.

At the door, her father, Jurgen, waited. "Give me the money," he said, and she obediently handed him the coins. As he pocketed them, he remarked, "Make sure you have my supper ready when I return." He left, and Libetta knew he was going to the tavern to drink her day's wages into his paunchy belly. Within her generous heart she forgave him, for she understood how much he still missed her mother, and needed the companionship of other farmers, just as she longed for the friendship of the three other seamstresses. Libetta wished they would like her, if only just a little.

After she fixed Jurgen's evening meal and put it in the oven to keep warm, Libetta ate some bread and cheese and prepared for bed. This was the only time of day she had for herself. She bathed with sweet-smelling soap and brushed new whispers into her auburn hair. Then she sat at the window to inhale the honeysuckled breeze and watch the shimmering stars overhead.

Each night at this time her thoughts were about her mother, who had died when Libetta

continued on page 41

# Deep Magic Reader Profile

The past two months, we conducted a survey of our readers. Below is a quick look at some of the responses to that survey. Check the next page for additional information.

| Reader Profile - Deep Magic | |
|---|---|
| **Favorite Authors (percentage of readers who selected a particular author)** | |
| 49% Tolkien<br>23% C.S. Lewis<br>19% Robert Jordan<br>15% J.K. Rowling<br>15% David Eddings | 10% Terry Brooks<br>10% Isaac Asimov<br>10% Tom Clancy<br>6% George R.R. Martin<br>6% Cecilia Dart-Thornton |
| **Book Reviews read (percentage of readers who selected a particular publication's reviews)** | |
| 26% Deep Magic<br>11% Amazon.com<br>4% Strange Horizons | |
| **Sources for purchasing books (percentage of readers who selected a particular source)** | |
| 77% Bookstore<br>40% Internet<br>38% Library<br>19% Used Bookstore | |
| **Influences to try a new book (percentage of readers who selected a particular influence)** | |
| 49% Browse bookstore<br>45% Friends<br>34% Reviews | 26% Internet<br>10% Library<br>10% Family |
| **Favorite things about the genre** | |
| Escapism<br>New Worlds | |
| **Least Favorite things about the genre** | |
| Cliché<br>Graphic Sex<br>Graphic Violence | |
| **The Best of Deep Magic** | |
| 45% Stories<br>26% Art<br>19% Safe Places<br>19% Articles<br>15% Writing Challenges | 10% Book Reviews<br>10% The Price (Free)<br>10% Writing Craft Info<br>6% Kenatos |
| **The Worst of Deep Magic** | |
| 12% Not in Print<br>6% Story Quality<br>6% Kenatos | |

continued on next page

# Reader Profile Comparison

## Deep Magic and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

The tables below compare the reader profiles of Deep Magic and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. While some aspects are very similar, it is interesting to look at some of the differences.

| Reader Profile - Deep Magic | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Subscription Price:** free | | | | |
| **Sex** | | | | |
| Male: 67% Female: 33% | | | | |
| **Age** | | | | |
| **18-25** | **26-45** | **46-55** | **56+** | |
| 33% | 50% | 13% | 2% | |
| **Education** | | | | |
| **Some college** | **College grad** | **Some post college** | **Post-grad degree** | |
| 24% | 43% | 0% | 13% | |
| **Annual Household Income** | | | | |
| **$26 - 50,000** | **$51 - 75,000** | **$76 - 100,000** | **$100k+** | |
| 41% | 33% | 7% | 17% | |
| **Average number of books purchased per year** | | | | |
| Hardcover: 5<br>Paperback: 15 | | | | |
| **Average $ spent per year on other products** | | | | |
| **Video games** | **DVDs** | **Movie tickets** | **Music** | **Collectibles or RPGs** |
| $98.00 | $114.00 | $106.00 | $91.00 | $77.00 |
| **Owns personal computer:** 100% | | | | |
| **Broadband:** 76%<br>**Dialup:** 24% | | | | |
| **Owns DVD player:** 96% | | | | |
| **Keeps back issues archived on PC:** 80% | | | | |
| **Readers per copy:** 1.13 | | | | |
| **Founded:** 2002 | | | | |
| **Subscribers:** 1,310 (30% of readership does not subscribe) | | | | |
| **Readership:** USA (63%), Australia (13%), Canada (11%), other (13%) | | | | |

| Reader Profile - The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Subscription Price:** $45/year ($4/issue) | | | | |
| **Sex** | | | | |
| Male: 61% Female: 39% | | | | |
| **Age** | | | | |
| **18-25** | **26-45** | **46-55** | **56+** | |
| 7% | 52% | 56% | 18% | |
| **Education** | | | | |
| **Some college** | **College grad** | **Some post college** | **Post-grad degree** | |
| 27% | 66% | 15% | 28% | |
| **Annual Household Income** | | | | |
| **$26 - 50,000** | **$51 - 75,000** | **$76 - 100,000** | **$100k+** | |
| 35% | 24% | 14% | 12% | |
| **Average number of books purchased per year** | | | | |
| Hardcover: 14<br>Paperback: 24 | | | | |
| **Average $ spent per year on other products** | | | | |
| **Video games** | **VCR Tapes** | **Movie tickets** | **Audio Tapes** | **Collectibles** |
| $136.00 | $105.00 | $63.00 | $115.00 | $193.00 |
| **Owns personal computer:** 75% | | | | |
| **Online:** 65% (of those who own a computer) | | | | |
| **Owns VCR:** 94% | | | | |
| **Keeps back issues longer than one year:** 71% | | | | |
| **Readers per copy:** 1.7 | | | | |
| **Founded:** 1949 | | | | |
| **Circulation:** 32,600 (as of 9/99) | | | | |
| **Readership:** USA, Canada | | | | |

## Page Turners
### Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

## A Song of Ice and Fire Books 1-3 (A Game of Thrones, A Clash of Kings, A Storm of Swords)

**By George R.R. Martin**

"In the Game of Thrones, you win or you die."

"Winter is coming."

Those are two of the central themes running through the saga of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The Seven Kingdoms is at threat, both from within and without. As a four-decade long winter threatens, the High King is killed by his enemies (most of whom are within his own family). Through the eyes of various characters, but most notably Lord Eddard Stark, we are introduced to a world with a rich historical background. Years before, a rebellion led by the High King and Eddard Stark toppled the ruling Targaeryn house, an ancient line of dragonriders whose intermingling has led to madness. As the story progresses, we come to realize that the dangers of the present have unassailable links to past sins, and that nothing remains without consequence.

As intricate as the politics of ancient Rome and as bloody as the English War of the Roses, the conflict depicted in A Song of Ice and Fire is one of the most realistic I have ever read in fantasy.

Through three volumes (so far) George R. R. Martin paints a vast canvas of treachery, greed and war. Through numerous point-of-view characters, from the noble Lord Eddard Stark to the sharp dwarf Tyrion (a genetic dwarf not a fantasy one), he shows us a world with a history that resonates as real as our own.

In the first book, the Hand of King Robert has died, leaving the way open for Eddard Stark, an honorable but flawed Lord of the North, to take his place. He, though, is reluctant to get involved in the deadly politics of the south lands. Meanwhile, across the Sea, the last surviving heir of the Targaeryn house sells herself to a horse lord to regain her family's throne.

Through the eyes of two of Eddard's sons, Bran and the bastard Jon, we discover other facets to this world: from the cruel harsh world of the Night Watch who protect the Seven Kingdoms from the dangers that lie in the far north, to the revelation that the High King's son is the illegitimate get of his wife and her own brother. Bran suffers for this discovery, being thrown from the top of the castle and breaking his legs, ending his hopes of being a knight.

From his arrival at King's Landing, Eddard is caught up in court intrigues, as he begins to discover the truth about the Queen and her brother. His honor weighs him down and he finds he must trust those he knows he shouldn't. Eddard's flaws are soon revealed and he pays dearly for his lack of cunning when the King is finally killed....

By the end of the book, the Kingdom has been riven as the northern Starks and the southern Lannisters battle it out, taking the roles of the York and Lancaster houses in England during the War of the Roses.

And across the Sea, dragons live once more…

In the second book, new factions enter the fray. Martin manages to unfold the story without turning any of the characters into true villains or heroes. He seems to delight in taking a character who most readers had booed or hissed in the first book, giving us a few chapters in their point of view in the second, and making them likeable! Of course, this also leads to many, many point of view characters. Nevertheless, Martin achieves the envious feat of keeping all of the characters interesting.

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(Though many fans rapidly grew tired of the character of Sansa, I have personally grown to like her over the series.) Though the second book ends with a huge battle, the third book throws everyone a curve ball as the factions replace themselves once again. Martin plays his novel like a chessboard, with each piece placed without the reader noticing and with important events revealed to be complex feints. In Martin's books, anything goes. And often does. That is one of the points that some fans are uncomfortable with: the number of important characters who get "lost" along the way. Many of the key players in the first book won't be around by the time you start the second book, many in quite surprising circumstances. Martin skillfully builds the reader up to think that things are going to go a certain way, only for the rug to be pulled out from under us in the last few chapters and everything turned on its head. He does this throughout the books, but it is most especially felt in the first and at the end of the third. Trust me, this is not a book you want to read if feeling particularly depressed, but at the same time it never felt as if Martin was just playing with our emotions or gratuitously killing off characters for the sake of it. Each character dies for a reason, and each death advances the overall story. The greatest thing about this trilogy is its believability. Martin has created a world that you can get immersed in, a world where things happen for a reason and in which each strand pulls together to create a whole. His descriptions are well rounded, giving us a good idea of the environment surrounding the characters, without delving into overly detailed descriptions that pull us out of the story. This is especially true of the wilderness in the north. The history of the world pulls you in, with Martin dealing tidbits of information in such a skilful way that you become chained to the story and have to know more.

Which brings us to the main problem with his books... The latest one isn't out yet! And no end in sight! Though Martin asserts that he is almost finished, there hasn't been any word since June, and the publisher is so confused he is giving out dates to various online book stores like candy to children. Either way, the manuscript still isn't finished and so it is going to be a long winter until it comes out. All in all, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is well worth the effort put in. It is an intelligent fantasy series that makes the reader think while keeping him on the edge of his seat, and has a very authentic feel to it that probably comes from the resonating links to ancient Roman history and the English War of the Roses.

*Possible objectionable material: incest, occasional sex scenes (though none very graphic), occasional violence, violence towards children, torture.*

*(Reviewed by Joel Brown)*

## Book Review: Fantasy
## Legends II (anthology)
### Edited by Robert Silverberg

I picked up the anthology *Legends II* because I was curious. Being a Terry Brooks fan, I had heard that he had written a short novel as a sequel to one of my favorites from his earlier works. Could he pull it off? Could he make the sequel equal to the richness, or would it be a shadow in comparison? When I learned that Robin Hobb and Raymond Feist graced the pages as well, it became a no-brainer. What I found is that they managed to pull it off. Rather than commenting on each of the short novels, I will highlight some of the best.

First is "Indomitable," by Terry Brooks. This is the sequel to *Wishsong of Shannara,* using the point of view of Jair Ohmsford, one of the principal characters of that novel. We learn that the evil magic of the Ildatch which we thought had been destroyed was not as defeated as everyone supposed. A few fragments of pages survived the destruction, and Jair is summoned by the crack-brained Cogline to deal with the emergency. Jair must venture into a place he fears the most and defeat the Ildatch a second time in order to rid the Four Lands of its evil. Brooks captures the tone from *Wishsong* perfectly. It was a pleasure to read.

Secondly, there is "Homecoming," set in Robin Hobb's world of the Liveship Traders. This short novel is a prequel of sorts, set in a time well before the events of the Vestrit family. Written in first person in the form of a noblewoman's diary, it invokes the setting and

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accomplishes characterization deftly. A group of exiles from Jamaillia are forced to pilgrim to the Cursed Shores where the river water eats away at their ships, clothing, and skin. In the Rain Wild territory, they must fight for survival against the elements and a sleeping magic that haunts their dreams and lures everyone to seek abandoned treasures of a forgotten race and civilization called the Elderlings.

Third, George R.R Martin showcases another prequel based on the previous short novel he wrote for the *Legends I* anthology. "The Sworn Sword" follows the towering young knight Dunk and his bald squire Egg as they return to their liege lord whose water rights have been villainously seized by a neighboring noblewoman known as the Red Widow. Dunk and Egg face off with the Red Widow herself and learn she is much less threatening than her reputation implied. The climactic battle between Dunk and the Red Widow's knight is very intense.

Fourth, Tad Williams brings us more from his Otherland saga with "The Happiest Dead Boy in the World." That title was enough of a draw to bring me to the virtual world of Orlando Gardiner. What intrigued me at the beginning was the riff on Tolkien's Rivendell. This virtual reality setting was created to simulate a universe of worlds comprised of genre classics. The souls of people enter the network and can assume the form and identities of other people. Orlando is the caretaker of this cyber-universe, a boy who no longer has a physical body; yet his soul and memories are very much alive and plagued by a network glitch which claims to be bearing his virtual offspring. A little far-fetched considering he has never met the virtual girl claiming to be pregnant.

Finally, Elizabeth Haydon conjures up a prequel as well for her *Symphony of the Ages* series. "Threshold' is set before the great cataclysm that destroyed the kingdom of Serendair. A group of companions is left behind on the self-destructing continent after the king commands an exodus in the hope of saving his people. Left behind is a noble-born knight who must command the deserted place in case the imminent destruction fails to materialize. Yet before the land's final moment passes, he makes a decision that may not only doom him but the entire planet as well.

*Legends II* is an enjoyable anthology. Each short novel is prefaced with some information about the series which spawned it. This was a helpful touch for understanding the general context of the worlds on display and the major plot points. I was surprised at how well many of the stories (like "Homecoming" and "Sworn Sword") stood independently. Previous knowledge was helpful but not mandatory to understand the threats and conflicts the characters faced. For those worlds which I had visited before, they were all pleasant reminders of what I enjoyed so much about them. Others, like 'Indomitable" and "The Happiest Dead Boy in the World," would be more difficult to get a sense of the danger because past knowledge is assumed and needed to truly get the full intent of the story.

*Possible objectionable material: some strong language in "The Sworn Sword" (as those who have read George R. R. Martin's work already know well).*

*(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)*

## Book Review: Fantasy
## Beyond the Summerland
### By L.B. Graham

The land of Kirthanin was created by the Allfather in peace. Man lived alongside man and no one killed. To help mankind live in peace, Allfather sent the Titans, angelic beings, to watch over mankind. Malek, chief of the Titans, however, wanted to control everything, usurping Allfather, so he tricked the man Andunin into rebellion. Malek and Andunin were eventually defeated, but it was prophesied that Malek would rise twice more with the very waters of the sea rising to fight with him the second time.

Thousands of years later, in Kirthanin's Third Age, young Joraiem comes to manhood. As has long been the case among the Novaana, the nobles of Kirthanin, Joraiem and the other Novaana of his age head south to the Summerland to be trained for a season in the arts of peace, war, and diplomacy in the hope that, as they come

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of age, the friendships forged in the Summerland will keep the land from war. Before he heads south, though, Joraiem is attacked by one of the Voiceless Ones, a Malekim, a servant of Malek (who has been in exile since his last defeat at the end of the Second Age). Joraiem defeats the Malekim.

On his journey south, he meets up with some other Novaana who are heading to the Summerland. On their way, they meet up with the blind prophet, Valzaan, who tells Joraiem that he possesses the gift of torrim redara, or in the common tongue, slow time, where all around him slows to a standstill. Valzaan, however, doesn't tell him why he has been thus gifted, only that it will be needed.

When in the Summerland city of Sulare, matters progress as they have for many generations of the Third Age: friendships are made, lessons are learned, and lifelong bonds are forged. Like his parents before him, Joraiem meets the love of his heart while in Sulare, the princess Wylla.

This tranquility, however, is interrupted when, one night, there is a blinding flash of light out in the ocean over the Forbidden Isle. Fearing that Malek may be rising again, a company of the Novaana, including Joraiem, head out for the Forbidden Isle on a reconnaissance mission. There they find more than they ever expected and are drawn back to Kirthanin for a mighty battle.

*Beyond the Summerland* is the first of a series and as such, it does not tell a complete tale. The more immediate story lines are brought to completion, but the longer storylines and deeper plot threads are left unresolved. It is not revealing anything that after the prologue, Malek is not seen at all, but like Sauron, is a lurking presence. Indeed, although it has become a hackneyed and trite comparison, this book is written in the tradition of *Lord of the Rings*. It is not, however, a rip-off but looks back to *Lord of the Rings* as its precursor, telling a large story that is centered around standard fantasy tropes, but is not dependent on them for its meaning. Rather, it uses the tropes to explore deep issues like honor and friendship, issues that non-fantastic literature does not (and can not) adequately examine.

This is author L.B. Graham's first book, and it shows at times. While the plotting is tight and well-paced, the characterization is at times flat, but this is limited mostly to the first part of the book. Once the Forbidden Isle lets off its flash of light, the characters rally 'round and come into themselves, finding direction and purpose, coming into focus. By the end of the book, the reader wants to pick up the next volume to find out what happens, not because the story is so compelling (although it is) but because the reader has come to care for the characters.

One of my lingering fears with fantasy published by religious publishers is that it will be didactic when it comes to portraying religion, and since religion is often (as it should be) a vital part of a well-realized secondary world, this often ruins the world as well as the work. Although the story of Malek and the fall of Kirthanin parallels the Judeo-Christian account of the fall, it does not allow this parallelism to become so didactic as to detract from the feel of the story. As mentioned above, the first part of the book is a bit stiff, but I chalk this up to *Beyond the Summerland* being an initial offering from a talented author. Once the story elements are laid out, however, Kirthanin comes into itself as its own world.

Although I was at first a bit hesitant about this book (publisher P&R has not built its reputation on fantasy works and has only recently begun publishing quality fiction), *Beyond the Summerland* exceeded my expectations. Once again, I found a treat that the readers of *Deep Magic* may not normally stumble across, but I recommend you go out of your way to have it cross your path.

*Possible objectionable material: none.*

*(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)*

## Book Review: Science Fiction
## The Giver
### By Lois Lowry

Jonas lives in a perfect society. The community works together as a unit, and everyone is well cared for. Food is prepared and delivered to all dwellings. Everyone has a job and contributes to the well being of

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the community.

Children are educated with their peers and have responsibilities for learning. At the age of eight, in addition to their schooling, they are expected to work as volunteers in different aspects of community care and responsibility. This gives them an opportunity to see and work in different careers. Children are monitored carefully; when they reach the age of twelve, they are given their lifelong assignments in their community.

Jonas is anxious about what his assignment will be. He is surprised when he is selected to be the next Receiver of Memory. The Receiver of Memory is responsible for keeping in his mind the experiences and wisdom of previous generations. Memories are transferred from one Receiver of Memory to the next Receiver one at a time.

As Jonas receives memories, he learns what people have given up in order to have such perfect and orderly lives, and he must decide if what is gained is worth the cost.

This book is very well written and thought provoking. I highly recommend either reading this one before your child does, or with your child in order to discuss it with him/her. Take the time to discuss the things in Jonas' community that are great, and the things that they have given up that are also important. Compare Jonas' society to our own.

While it is a children's book, I recommend this one for ages 11 and up. A younger child might be confused and perhaps disturbed by some of Jonas' experiences.

Initially, I found the ending to this book strange, but after reading it a couple more times, it works for me.

*Possible objectionable material: Some discussion of sexual stirrings referred to as "stirrings."*

*(Reviewed by Rochelle Taylor Buck)*

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She squawked and spluttered, slapping his arms with the palms of her hands, trying to screech something about "You idiot *man!*" After a moment had passed and he still hadn't let her go, her protests turned to giggles and he felt her own kisses on his face. He started to pull away, but she held him fast.

"Oh no you don't! You're not getting away *that* easy!"

They wrestled around, laughing and giggling, until—

"What do you think, boys? Should we let 'em get cozier?"

They froze, with Merria on top of him. A wave of chuckles came from the woods around them. They untangled themselves and stood.

Three unshaven men stepped from the brush, two with brown leather coats and one wearing a gray silk jacket with a bit of gilding around the collar. They brandished their weapons at him and Merria, two swords and a spear. On instinct he reached for his own sword. He clenched his fist when he remembered it wasn't there.

Darev heard the sound of footsteps behind him and turned to see three other men step from the trees carrying a sword, a spear, and a half-moon battle axe.

The man in gray silk stepped forward and smiled, showing gold teeth between dull yellow ones. "Me and my boys here were enjoying that little show you were putting on for us, but we do have a schedule to keep. Don't we, boys?" More chuckles.

Darev spoke through clenched teeth. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"We're bandits, boy. Thieves. Brigands. Cutthroats." Grins all around. A couple hearty laughs. Merria's grip tightened on his arm.

One of the men behind the man in gray silk leaned forward with eagerness and licked his lips. There was a wild fire burning in his eyes that repulsed Darev, all the more because he had seen it before. Many times. He had extinguished that fire with his own hands.

Merria whispered in his ear, her voice high. "What are we going to *do*, Darev?"

He looked into her beautiful face, her eyes like blue crystals. "I don't know," he said.

The man in silk spoke. "Usually in this situation we'd kill you and take your girl there, not to mention your things–" he swung his head toward the cart "–but the boss told me not to kill if I don't have to. Got tired of it, you know?" Darev wrinkled his nose. The man pointed his sword at his chest and spoke in a low voice. "Don't be a fool, boy. I'm a killer. We're all killers. Let us take what we want, and we'll let you go away with your lives. Nothing else, but at least you'll have those." Darev surveyed the group and inwardly shook his head. The man was lying; only he and two of the others had killed. The others didn't have that tightness in their eyes, the lines in their brows. They knew how to fight, though. He might be able to disarm two of them bare-handed, but not six.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Come on, boy! Are you getting ready to *spring?* Put up your hands and give up!"

The men around him inched closer and he tensed, ready to fight. Merria pressed against him. "Don't fight them, Darev! Even if you win somehow, you know what will happen to you!"

Images flashed through his mind of carnage and death, and he gritted his teeth.

"Last chance, boy," said the man in silk.

Darev squeezed his eyes shut and put his hands in the air.

The man strode up to him and slammed the flat of the blade against his face. Darev was spinning and falling. Dots of light danced before his eyes. When he realized where he was and what was happening, he found himself on his back in the cold grass, and there were men laughing all around him. Merria was screaming, kicking against the men holding her.

"Darev!" she screamed. "Darev!"

Shaking, he rolled to a sitting position and tried to rise, but a hard, heavy boot slammed into his chin and sent him to the dirt again. He didn't try to rise this time.

"Darev! Darev! Get your hands off me! Stop!" Her cries were fading along with the footsteps and laughter of the men. They were taking her away.

Darev put his hands to the ground, his elbows shaking, but before he could push himself up, a boot thumped down on his back, forcing him into the dirt and pressing the air from his lungs. His eyes shot open and he tried to gasp for breath, but his lungs were being crushed.

The low voice of the man in silk came from above him. "Remember what I told you about going free? Well, do you believe in an afterlife? They say you'll be free there." The man gave him one final shove and started away. "He's all yours, Ellit. Have fun." Then Darev heard the crazy man cackling with glee right by his shoulder. The one who had the fire in his eyes.

He heard the rasping sound of a sword being drawn. "Let's see," said the man, sounding thoughtful. "Where to begin?" The point touched his neck; then, with a sharp stab of pain, it bit into his flesh. Darev clutched the grass and gritted his teeth as the man drew the blade along his skin, opening a narrow cut down his back at least a foot long. The warmth of his own blood beaded along the line. As his senses returned to him, the pain grew clearer, closer. Tears of pain managed to find their way out of his eyes though he shut them tight.

The blade stopped between his shoulder blades in the center of his back. "I could just kill you, right now," said the man. The point bit a little deeper, just a little... Darev's mouth parted but he didn't let any sound escape. "I could push this into your heart, but it'd be over too fast." The man wheezed a mad laugh, like the neighing of a horse. The sword cut into his flesh with every movement.

An eagle cried somewhere overhead, and the man shifted his position. "Would you look at that? Don't see too many–"

Darev spun, snatching the sword away by the flat, and spinning further, slammed the hilt against the man's face. The man's mouth parted with a puff of breath; blood and saliva flew. He crumpled to the ground without a sound.

Darev grasped the sword by the hilt, raised it to finish the kill–and recoiled, dropping the weapon as he realized what he had been about to do.

He stood panting, staring at the sprawled form of the man beneath him. He shook his head, dazed. No more killing, no more killing ever again. They had agreed on that, him and Merria, and that was what had saved–

Merria! He sprang away from the unconscious form of Ellit and sprinted in the direction they had taken her. The men had left the cart, but Star was gone. He ran through the tree line into the woods, stopped, and looked about him in all directions. Nothing. He almost called her name, but caught himself.

*Stay calm*, he urged himself. *If this was one of my old missions–if those men were my target, what would I do?*

Track them, stay out of sight.

He rushed low along the ground and soon found a small stream with a big mess of tracks; men and horses. They had ridden away.

With Merria.

He ran along the stream bank, following the tracks northwest, then skidded to a halt. A horse stood chomping the sparse grass. It lifted its head and stared at him. Waiting for Ellit,

who lay unconscious back in the clearing. He untethered the horse and swung up into the saddle. Digging his heels into the mount's flanks, he sped along the stream, following the tracks.

After Darev had gone perhaps a mile, he saw a group of shapes far ahead of him, moving between the trees. As he closed the distance, he saw that they were men on horses. At least ten of them, probably more. The man in silk had spoken of a "boss." The boss must have been with the rest of his men.

Darev cursed under his breath. He would have to wait until they stopped for the night to have a chance of rescuing Merria. He reached for a sword, found it among the saddlebags, stuck in a sheath on the horse's flank, drew it–and dropped it. It struck the ground with a *clong* and bounced. It must have been a spare of Ellit's, but Darev didn't want it. No more killing.

He rode for half a minute before he pulled the horse to a stop, turned, and rode back to pick the sword up. He could still use it–he just wouldn't kill with it.

He hung behind the pack of horsemen, keeping just out of sight, wishing the sun would hurry up and go down so he could get close enough to see what was happening to Merria. Another three hours passed before the shadows finally grew long enough that the men ahead decided to stop for the night. They made their camp in a little valley between two hills, and Darev led his horse up onto the one on his right that was almost bare of trees, to get a look at the camp below.

When he tethered his horse, he saw that two orange campfires had sprung up, revealing the shapes of men and beasts. He shook his head; now he could see that there were about fifteen of them altogether.

He crept down the hill into the valley. The camp was in a little clearing, and when he reached the tree line, he lay in the shadows and scanned the camp for Merria. The men were all well armed but poorly dressed, probably not because they were pressed for money but because they just didn't care.

He saw the man in gray silk, talking to a man in a purple silk coat who wore a long sword at his side in a tarnished silver sheath.

"No, Ellit still hasn't come back," the man in gray was saying.

The big man scowled and spit into the cold dirt. "You should have just killed him, Bret," he said. "Now there may be consequences."

Bret said, "I saw something in that kid's eyes, like he was studying me. I'd say he's killed before."

A light breeze swept through the trees and Darev saw a flutter of soft white clothing across the camp, near the other fire.

The man nodded. "Keep an eye out. I'm guessing we haven't seen the last of him."

As Darev crept away, he thought, You're right, you haven't seen the last of me.

He could tell it was Merria before he reached the shadows outside the second circle of firelight. Her white dress stirred again in the soft wind and her cloak was draped over her shoulders. She was staring straight ahead into the fire as it danced and flickered, a blank look on her face. There was a dark spot on the side of her head like she had been struck with something hard. He suppressed the snarl rising within him and forced himself to keep quiet as he crept up behind her. There were only three men nearby; all he had to do was get them to look the other way while he cut her bonds and...

No. She was *chained* to the tree, not bound with rope. He couldn't break that without making too much noise.

She stirred, sniffed. A little orange diamond glistened in the firelight as it rolled down her cheek. He knew what he had to do, for now; he had to comfort her as much as he could.

He crept up behind the tree. The men were less than fifteen feet away, so he spoke in a soft whisper. "Merria, it's me." Her body went rigid against the tree and she turned her head, drawing in a long breath through her nose, her wide eyes glistening. "No! Don't move." She caught herself and thumped back against the tree. One of the men turned, a scowl of suspicion on his face. Darev kept still in the darkness. The man looked her up and down, smirked, and turned back to his talk with the other men.

"Don't say anything, Merria," he said. "Nod your head a little for yes, turn it for no. Get it?" She nodded her head a little. "Good. Have they hurt you?" She nodded. "Have they...done anything worse?" She turned her head. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Do you know where they're taking you?" She turned her head. "That man–the one in the purple coat. Is he in charge?" She nodded.

He laid his head against the cold grass, let out a breath. How could he do this? "Merria. I need to go now, to get a better look at the camp. But I'll be back. We're going to get out of this." He scooted forward, reached for her hand, and took it. She sniffed again, squeezed it so hard it hurt. Then she turned. Her eyes were wide, frantic.

"Darev!" she hissed. "Don't kill anyone! Please, you have to promise me you–look out!"

He had just heard the footsteps, but it was too late. A heavy boot slammed into his side, knocking the breath from his lungs. Merria let out a small cry.

"Well, well!" came a rough voice. "Look what we have here!" A callused hand took Darev's hair and jerked his head upward. An ugly face grinned at him through a mouth missing teeth. "Look at this, boys!"

The men by the fire were rising, approaching.

A foot came up and struck the man hard between the legs. His grin froze, his eyes rolling into his head. He fell, clutching his groin. "Go, Darev!" Merria screamed. He leapt to his feet and staggered off into the night. He heard footsteps behind him, but as his head cleared and he got some air back into his lungs, they quickly disappeared behind him. He circled back around to the top of the small hill, and surveyed the camp.

Cries echoed through the night and shapes moved about the light of the fires like a stirred anthill. He saw Merria, but now there were four men standing guard beside her. Still...it might be his chance to find out a few things.

He found a line of men moving through the trees and moved down the hill to intercept them. He trailed them for a moment and saw that one lagged behind. He ran ahead of them a little, keeping to the shadows, then waited behind a tree as they swept past him one at a time. As the last man approached, Darev clutched the hilt of his sword tight and prepared to draw.

In one motion he leapt forward and jerked the sword from its sheath, slamming the hilt into the man's stomach. Without a sound the man fell, gasping and writhing in the dirt. Darev dropped to his knees and pressed his elbow into the back of the man's neck just below his head. Almost instantly the man was unconscious.

He hid the man in the brush, then stole up the hill and led his horse far away from the camp. He waited until he thought things should have calmed down, then waited a little more, then crept back to the hill. Below him in the camp, it looked as if they had given up the search and doubled the watch. He made his way back through the woods to where his catch lay and waited for the man to awaken.

Just over an hour later Darev stirred from the beginning of a dream to hear the man groaning. He shook his head at himself and drew his sword, pressing the point against the man's neck, beneath his chin. The man's eyes shot open, flicking between Darev and the blade.

"Answer my question immediately and truthfully," Darev whispered, "or I drive this blade into your brain." The man looked like he wanted to nod very badly, but the point had already drawn a dark bead of blood. Darev smiled. "Now," he said. "Where are you going?"

"S–Sathia!"

Darev frowned. The city was north of Merrol Valley, but he didn't know how far. "How far is it?"

"Two days! Less maybe!"

He ground his teeth. That didn't give him much time. Two more nights, or maybe only one. "What does your boss intend to do with her once you reach Sathia?" Beads of sweat broke out on the man's face, and he began to shake. He tried to swallow and let out a squeak as the point dug a little deeper. "Answer me!"

"B-Blait's going to s–sell her!"

Darev felt his brows hardening into a stony glare. "For labor?" he said.

"N–no! P–Pretty young women like her fetch a good–ahhh!" A shriek tore its way out of the man's throat as Darev's blade bit deeper, deeper...

He threw the blade aside to keep himself from pushing it all the way, and it clattered into the trees. He slammed his fist into the man's jaw, then his other fist, again and again.

He forced himself to stop. There was blood on his hands and the man was unconscious. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself then looked toward the camp, perhaps a hundred yards down the hill. Had anyone heard?

With clenched teeth, he went through the man's pouches and found some twine, which he used to bind his hands and feet. He hid the man in the brush and went back to where he had left his horse.

He was going to have to pick them off one at a time. Fast. But there could be no killing. He had felt it there, as his blade had drawn the sweet, red blood from living veins. The bloodlust had wanted to take him again, and he had wanted to let it. He couldn't let that happen, not after Merria had given him so much.

* * *

The next day he kept behind them, just out of sight as he had before. Occasionally he would crest a hill and survey the group of riders, looking for stragglers or small groups. But there weren't any. They were all staying in one tight pack. Blait was no fool.

Darev darted back and forth, looking for a way to do something–anything–but before he knew it, the sky was reddening with the sunset and a half moon was shining bright overhead.

The men made camp that night at the top of a large hill with a clearing thirty yards across. It was the barest patch of ground Darev had seen for at least two miles. When the sun had set and full night had fallen, he tethered his horse some distance off and crept forward to the edge of the trees.

The men looked like they were all waiting for something; they stood or lounged about, scanning the trees, some of them glancing at Blait where he stood in between their *four* fires–one at each corner of the camp. Darev shuffled around the ring of firelight looking for an opening, but Merria was right in the center and surrounded by men. He continued probing, probing...

Blait took Merria by the wrist and jerked her to her feet. "Boy!" he called to the trees. He didn't look at Darev, but maybe the man really did know where he was and was trying to get him to drop his guard. An enemy had tried that once, before Darev had killed him.

Blait drew a long, shining dagger from his belt, and held it to Merria's throat. "Come out, boy. *Now!*" He bellowed the last word and jerked Merria's head back by her hair, pulling the skin of her throat taut. Darev took an involuntary step forward.

Merria was struggling to hold back tears. "Don't listen to him Darev! I'm no good to him dead! I'm worth fifteen crowns at lea–oh!" Blait had stuck the point of the dagger into her skin.

"You've cost me two men already, boy! She's hardly worth losing two more. Or even one. Turn yourself in now and we won't hurt either of you–but we'll still sell you. Male slaves aren't worth a fifth of what girls like her usually go for, but we'll even try to sell you to the same master! What do you say?"

Blait drew the blade along Merria's smooth skin and she shrieked, bit her lip, and shook as she held back sobs. Blood came. Blait drew the knife along, further, two inches, three, four. Darev had taken the same number of steps forward.

When he heard the sound of rasping metal behind him he reacted on instinct, stepping aside as the two men crashed through the trees, yelling and waving their swords. They swung at him, but he ducked and spun round behind them, driving his elbow into the first man's spine.

The second man swung again as the first hit the ground, but Darev slipped aside. By habit he took the man's wrist and thrust his body against the forearm, snapping the bone. The man's scream echoed throughout the hills. Darev removed the sword from his weakening grasp and sliced the blade across his middle as the man fell, spilling blood on the ground.

Merria screamed, "No, Darev!"

He barely heard her. An arrow shot through the air and he rolled, but it would have missed him by at least four feet anyway. Men ran out to meet him, their weapons gleaming in the orange firelight. He leapt to his feet, rushing at them as they came.

He performed as he had been taught, doing everything to perfection, and the men began to fall one by one to his blade. Blood flew, but he flew faster. Screams filled the air and bodies thudded to the ground.

Soon he realized they had begun to run. A man skidded to a halt before him and turned to flee, but Darev slashed his sword across his calves and the man fell screaming. Two knives gleamed in the man's belt, and Darev snatched one of them up and threw, burying it up to the hilt in another fleeing man's back.

The man with the bow threw it to the ground and fled, but Darev ran him down and parted his head from his shoulders with a swift, easy stroke. He turned and hurled his sword end over end, and it slammed into the last fleeing man's back, punching through the front of his chest.

He, Merria, and Blait were surrounded by blood and dying men, some of them groaning and moving in a daze, some of them still. Merria was still screaming.

"Please, Darev, stop! Please!"

Blait's eyes were wide with horror when Darev turned his gaze upon him, and the hand holding the knife slipped from Merria's throat a few inches.

Darev bent and picked up the second knife, and a heartbeat later it punched through Blait's arm. He screamed and his own knife fell. He toppled to the ground and clutched his arm. Merria fell away from him, hitting the ground, but instead of rising she lay sobbing.

Darev strode to where Blait lay and knelt, taking the man's neck in an iron grip and

slamming his head to the ground. He brought his face so close he could smell the bad brandy on the man's breath. "Do you know who I am?" he said. Blait shook his head as best he could. Fat beads of sweat gathered and ran down the man's face. "I didn't think so. Otherwise you would have left us alone. Not three months ago I was the King of Talia's chief assassin. I killed my first man when I was eleven. It was so easy. Everyone thinks children are innocent. Do you know how many men I've killed since then?" The man kept staring, his eyes widening even more if that was possible. "Even I don't know. I lost count. But this woman saved me. She taught me what love is. And you tried to take her from me." He took Blait's knife in such a grip that his knuckles turned white, and he raised it over his head. Blait writhed beneath him and clawed at the hand at his throat.

"Darev, *STOP!*"

He froze. Merria was on her hands and knees, her eyes glistening, tears streaming down her cheeks. He looked at the knife in his hand, stood, dropped it, and looked at the bare hilltop covered with bleeding bodies. He himself was covered with blood, spattered from head to foot.

Blait staggered to his feet and ran off down the hill. A moment later he disappeared into the trees.

Darev dropped to his knees. Merria stared back at him. Then she stumbled forward and held him. Blood from his clothes streaked her white dress red.

"I've killed more men than I've heard named," he said. She clutched him harder. He barked a bitter laugh. "What did I think was going to happen, anyway? I'd stop being a killer?" Her grip tightened even more. "Once it's inside you, Merria–once you've killed–it doesn't go away."

"Maybe one day, Darev," she said. "We'll find a place where you won't have to kill. Then it can end."

He shook his head. "It won't end. It's there inside me."

Her head shook from side to side on his shoulder. "Maybe that place is Merroll Valley. Maybe it will end when we leave this place."

He swallowed. She sat back, looked into his eyes. Her eyes shone at him, only inches away. His Merria. His savior. "Let's do that right now," he said.

She nodded, and they stood and stumbled down the hill, away from the orange firelight that cast flickering shadows on the still forms of dead men.

# The End

*Jonathan Ruland is currently a college student in southeast Michigan. He has been an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy for years and has found he just can't get enough of the magic...or in the case of this story, sword fighting. Jon invites you to visit his website at www.jonathanruland.com.*

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The peacock courtier continued to chatter in her ear as the young woman turned her attention toward the King's bodyguard once more. He was an imposing figure. Over six feet in height with close-cropped greying hair, and eyes that held only the promise of death. His face could have been carved from stone for all the expression it revealed. The only anomaly was his garb. Black would have suited his demeanour perfectly, yet he chose to wear garish red. Red leather breeches tucked into boots of the same colour. Red-stained leather tunic beneath a blood-red wool cloak. Only irony could have prompted the choice, a display of contempt for the nickname bestowed upon him. "He was persuaded to give the court a display of his skills. The King insisted; well you know how Kings can be, especially ours, eh? So there he was, juggling two daggers and an apple, never seen anything like it, spinning all ways they were. Next thing we know, someone in the crowd pulls a sword from his cloak and charges at the King. Well, he turns as calm as you like, and sends one of the daggers flashing across the room. Buries itself to the hilt in the assassin's throat it does. At the same time he catches the apple on the point of the other dagger, and takes a bite out of it! Raised a chill right along my spine it did, I can tell you."

* * *

The day's affairs passed without incident, and as evening drew towards dusk he handed the King into the care of the night guards. Taking his customary place on the cold battlements he watched the curtains of night draw closed. A softly spoken greeting spun him around, dagger gliding from the folds of his cloak. The young woman paid no heed to the sharp steel gleaming dully inches form her pale throat. No hint of fear marked her voice as she leaned against the chill stone beside him. "Put away your knife. You have no need of violence this night."

Sensing little danger in the woman beside him, he slid the dagger back into its concealed sheath, and waited for her to reveal her purpose. Undoubtedly she was another of the many who sought tales of bloodshed and violence, details of the stories on which his reputation was built. "The deeds of your past hold no interest for me. The crime you would commit tomorrow is what brings me here."

Despite the shock her statement caused, his body retained its relaxed posture, face betraying no hint of emotion. She continued, face a white glow against the dark background of the night. "The bargain you struck ends tomorrow, and with it the last vestige of your soul is forfeit. If you continue along the path you tread you will doom yourself forever."

A dangerous fire smouldered in his dark eyes as he turned towards her, straightening, hand reaching once again for the dagger. "I accepted my fate long ago, lady. Willingly. For ten years my life has been devoted to one task, and tomorrow I will complete that task. If the price is eternal damnation then so be it, for I will have my vengeance. I do not know how you know so much, but do not attempt to stop me. One more life will matter little to the blood already staining my hands."

Her eyes were cool and steady, locked on his as she replied. "I am not here to stop you, Liomar, only to advise. If you kill Vanakis, then the blood spilled so far will be as a drop in the ocean. If you murder the ambassador tomorrow, Ventis will declare war against Amaria and thousands will die."

His reply was a growled, "I care not."

Already turning, he was about to stalk away as her next words reached him. "What kind of bargain do you think Vanakis struck to raise himself to such a lofty position in the Ventian

court?"

He spun back, the point of the dagger once more pricking at her throat. "What do you mean?"

Ignoring the threat of steel, she continued. "Think about it carefully, Liomar. You were a horse trader, Vanakis a farmer. Yet here are two powerful men, one a King's bodyguard, the other an ambassador. The two of you could plunge your countries into war. Do you really believe this is a coincidence? You are both pawns, Liomar, small pieces in a larger game. Opposing puppets whose strings are pulled by the same master. Your choice tomorrow determines the outcome."

Liomar studied her face. "What part do you play in this game then, you who know so much?"

"I am only a messenger, Liomar. The voice of your conscience perhaps."

With that final word she clasped the knife between the palms of her hands and forced it gently downward. Then she turned and walked away along the battlements to disappear into the darkness of a tower doorway. The blade of Liomar's knife shone faintly as he slid it once more into the leather sheath.

* * *

He did not sleep that night, yet still the nightmare haunted him. Ten years he had spent hunting down the men responsible for it. Now the last of the six was within his grasp. The rage he had nurtured for so long should be surging through his veins, crying out for vengeance. Instead only doubts assailed him. He had claimed not to care, but that was a lie just as most of the stories of the many he had killed were lies. Fifteen men had met their deaths at the point of his blade, and he remembered the faces of every one. None had died without the chance to defend himself, not even those who had first set him on the path of vengeance. Despite his protestations to the contrary there was still a small part within himself which mourned every life destroyed, grieved for what he had become. Like a finger scratches at a sore, the young woman had opened that wound once again. In her eyes had been something he had long ago abandoned, the promise of redemption. Yet that could only happen if he set aside his need for revenge, and he was not sure that he possessed the strength to do that. He studied the scars on his wrists as he tried to sort his thoughts into order. The ridged flesh was yet another constant reminder of the oath he had set himself. Once again, he saw the blood flowing, a crimson river running from his own body to mingle with that of those he had loved more than life itself. Hardening his resolve, he shrugged off both memories and doubts as he awaited the dawn of his last day.

* * *

The hushed whispers which always accompanied his entrance to the throne room increased. For the first time in years he had forsaken the costume associated with his name. Only the soft leather gloves were dyed red, the remainder of his garments black. Today the bloodshed ended. One more death would see it finished, and he could return to the darkness. The King's only comment was a raised eyebrow as he gestured for Liomar to take his place behind the throne. As the affairs of the court droned on, Liomar was left alone with his thoughts, hearing again the words of his young visitor. As if the thought had summoned her forth, he became aware of her presence in the crowd, her pale eyes meeting his, concerned and

questioning. Turning his gaze aside, he attempted to shut both the girl and her arguments from his mind. Yet he could feel her eyes upon him, urging, pleading with him to do the right thing.

At the appointed hour the doors to the throne room swung open, admitting Vanakis, ambassador of Ventis. All else was forgotten in that one moment. His eyes locked to the figure limping toward the throne, fists clenched at his sides as the familiar anger surged within him once more. Forcing it down, he studied the approaching man. The stooped body and gaunt grey features were not what he had expected. Vanakis, it seemed, was a sick man. As he neared the throne, lowering himself to one knee before the King, the wheeze of his breathing could be heard above the murmur of the crowd. Despite Vanakis' obvious frailties, Liomar refused to allow sympathy to dilute his rage. As the ambassador rose unsteadily, Liomar sprang forward, dagger sliding with practised ease into his fist. The King's mouth fell open in shock as his bodyguard leapt from the dais, thrust aside two of Vanakis' retinue of guards, and knotted one red-clad fist in the ambassador's shirt. The point of the dagger pressed against Vanakis' throat in cold, silent warning as Liomar dragged him backward across the throne room. Courtiers and servants scattered aside, frightened sheep in the path of a wolf. Guards, held in check both by shock and the hovering dagger, looked to their King for advice. Vanakis' six personal guards drew their weapons and stalked forward in pursuit.

It should have been over in seconds. The razor sharp steel should have released Vanakis' blood in a red torrent. Moments later, Liomar's own blood should have joined it as the guards cut him down in revenge. This was the scene he had played out so many times in his mind. Yet now, as the guards began to close around him, he hesitated. Never before had he cut a man down without giving him the chance to defend himself. In addition, the girl was still staring at him, their eyes locking briefly as he edged towards one of the many tapestries adorning the throne room walls. As the King yelled at him to put aside his weapon, Liomar ducked behind the heavy cloth, triggering the secret door and hauling Vanakis with him.

The passageway behind the tapestry led directly upward to one of the battlement towers. Liomar dragged his wheezing captive after him, aware of the thudding boots of the guards behind them. Forcing Vanakis through a heavy wooden door at the tower's summit, he slammed the door behind him, sliding its solid iron bolt into place as the first shoulder crashed impotently against the far side. Turning to confront the man who would be his last victim, he found Vanakis leaning against the crenellations, calmly staring at his captor. Despite his laboured breathing and the obvious pain wracking his frail body he showed no fear, meeting Liomar's glare with watery eyes. "I intend to kill you, Vanakis, but not unarmed. Pick up the knife and defend yourself."

Liomar dropped a second dagger to the stones, kicking it towards Vanakis. The ambassador made no move as he replied. "If you wish to see me dead, you need only wait until tomorrow. Or is it your intention to prevent the treaty?"

The answer surprised Liomar. Pleading or defiance he would have expected, even curiosity, but not such calm indifference. "The treaty means nothing to me. Only your death matters."

Vanakis suppressed a hacking cough before speaking again. Dull thuds echoed through the tower as the guards attempted to force the door. "I am dying. When the treaty is signed this body will fail me. That is the price I must pay. If you wish my death you need only wait. This I would beg of you. Whatever offence it is that I have caused you, I ask that you put it aside until the paper is signed. The prosperity of our two lands depends on it. Do not doom thousands for one death."

His words, so similar to those of the young woman, gave Liomar reason to pause. Lowering the dagger, he stepped toward Vanakis, voice barely audible above the thudding from behind the door. "You raped and murdered my family, Vanakis. Ten years I have waited for this day. The bargain I struck led me here, to this point in time. Why? Why did they die, Vanakis? What bargain did you strike?"

Vanakis' eyes widened in horror as Liomar spoke. "They were your family! Oh Gods, how can you ever forgive me. How could you ever understand. All I have ever wanted was peace between your land and mine. I was a farmer, a simple man, and such men cannot alter the destiny of nations. When I was offered the chance to do just that I took it without thinking. My own life and soul seemed such a small price to pay for the prize of peace. I never imagined that others would have to face such a terrible fate. Then I let myself be convinced. Three lives for an end to generations of feuding and war, destruction and death. Three deaths for thousands of lives." Tears slid from Vanakis' eyes, sliding down his cheeks as he continued. " I honoured the bargain, and for my sins I have slept not a single night since without seeing terrified faces. Today my life's ambition will be realised, and tomorrow I will have release from the crimes which made it possible. My soul will burn in eternal torment, but I will embrace that torment gladly."

The sincerity of Vanakis' speech was plain and now Liomar understood. He could not forgive the man, but he did understand. Words echoed through his mind.

"*You are both pawns, Liomar, small pieces in a larger game."*

Suddenly Liomar understood the game. He and Vanakis had been played against one another, but Liomar had been given the stronger hand. It had been intended from the start that he would slaughter the weaker man, that the treaty would not be signed, and war would rage between Ventis and Amaria. Suppressed rage burst forth anew. It was directed not at Vanakis, but at the one responsible for setting the game in motion. As the pounding at the door increased and the hinges began to give way, he spoke one last time to Vanakis. "I cannot forgive you, Vanakis, but neither can I kill you. Sign your treaty and I will see you in Hell."

With those final words he turned away, and as the door finally burst open before the onslaught of Vanakis' rescuers, cast himself from the battlement. Vanakis followed the downward plunge with wide-eyed horror, flinching as Liomar's body crashed to the cobble-stoned courtyard far below, splayed like a broken doll.

* * *

Liomar's eyes snapped open to a familiar sight. Once before he had stood on the same flat-topped rock, surrounded by a sea of burning crimson. As before he faced the Lord of that place. Asmordius glowered at him from his own vantage point above the bubbling waves. Twin points of displeasure burned beneath grey eyebrows, drawn together in a frown. The crash of thunder accompanied him as he spoke. "You have disappointed me, Liomar. Defied me as no other mortal has ever dared. Be assured that the pain you will suffer as a result will be everlasting."

Liomar returned the stare, refusing to be intimidated by the towering figure. "Any torment you inflict will be as nothing to the loss of my family, and will be lessened by the knowledge that your designs have failed. You used me, Asmordius, as you used Vanakis and the others, and I will not be a pawn in anyone's game."

Asmordius' laughter set waves crashing against the rock on which Liomar stood. "You are a fool, Liomar. You think you have thwarted me? Ten years is nothing to me. I will merely start again. There are mortals aplenty who will corrupt their souls for any number of reasons, as

did Vanakis and yourself. You have provided an interesting diversion, and while I do not have the chaos I had hoped for I still have both you and Vanakis. The sweetest souls of all are those of good men lost to darkness. Twice now you have taken your own life. You are twice damned, Liomar. Only this time I will not return you. I have no further use for you."

While Asmordius talked Liomar turned away, hand sliding inside the folds of his cloak. "Face me, Liomar, and let your torment begin."

Liomar gripped the hilt of his dagger, and spinning on his boot heel, let it fly towards Asmordius, one last gesture of defiance. Pale fire lanced from the blade as the knife spun towards the laughing figure. Making no move to avoid the puny weapon, Asmordius raised one hand, allowing the blade to sink into the flesh of his palm. Again thunder crashed and lightning speared skyward from the point of impact. Asmordius threw back his head and shrieked in pain. White fire writhed up his flailing arm, snaking swiftly across his powerful frame. Beating desperately at the incandescent flames, Asmordius danced a jig of pain to the very edge of his column of stone. The sound of his agony beat down upon Liomar like fists, and he fell to his knees on his own rock. Asmordius tottered wildly for several heartbeats before his tortured balance failed him, and he plunged into the roiling waves. Thunder drum-rolled, lightning spat across the blood-red sky, and a tidal wave of flame surged towards the lonely figure of Liomar. As the boiling crest rose above him, he closed his eyes once more, waiting for the flames to wash over him.

* * *

Instead of heat, he was surprised to find himself bathed in cold white light. Opening his eyes, he was faced once more by a familiar figure, smiling in greeting. "You see, Liomar. There is always redemption, even for one with so little hope as yourself. There are those here who have waited long for your arrival. Come."

Taking his arm, the young woman led him onward, through gates of delicate silver, into a garden of unearthly beauty.

# The End

*Michael Graves is 37 years old and lives at the moment in Germany with his wife Susan. He has now had a handful of short stories published and can say that while the story ideas come easily, writing such things as author biographies and C.V's gives him a headache!*

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was born. Almost eighteen now, Libetta tried to picture her mother's face, wishing on all the stars that she could see it just once, or feel the touch of her hand. Libetta often felt empty, with little affection from her father, a gruff man who tended his farm by day and drank by night.

From her window she looked across the open fields at the city where she worked. The House of High Sorcerers stood next to the Palace, and the tips of both spires pierced the moonlit sky. Each High Sorcerer was in service to a member of the royal family. The Lady of Good Spells entertained the Queen, while the Wizard of Coins was constantly at the King's elbow, for his majesty loved the little tricks of finding a coin in his beard or behind his ear.

When the candlelights in the city's towers were extinguished, Libetta blew out her own taper and went to bed. Lingering thoughts of her mother pressed against her eyelids while she slept, and she found some small happiness within the shadows of her dreams.

* * *

On the morning of her eighteenth birthday, Libetta rose early and carefully entwined her hair into a chignon at the nape of her neck. This was the custom to signify that she was no longer a young maiden, but a full-grown woman, ready to consider proposals of marriage. When her father saw this, his face saddened. "You are now a woman, and will leave me as soon as you find a husband."

"No, Father," Libetta told him. "I will not leave you alone to take care of the household as well as tend the farm. I will seek a husband who will be a help to you in the fields."

Jurgen's eyes misted. "You are a good girl, Libetta," he said, the pouches of his cheeks quivering slightly. He opened a drawer and took from it a small, slender box that he placed before her. "This is all I have left of your mother. All her other goods and possessions I had to sell to provide for your care when you were a baby. A man knows not how, alone. But I saved this, for it was her pride and joy. It is now yours."

Libetta's fingers trembled as she opened the tiny box. There, inside, on a bed of black velvet, lay a golden needle. It was slender and strong, with the sharpest point Libetta had ever seen. When she touched it gently with the tip of her finger, her whole hand tingled. It was as if her mother had spoken to her, and her mother's image slid into Libetta's mind, to be imprinted there forever. "It sends me her presence," Libetta whispered.

Jurgen nodded. "She always claimed it had the aura of magic." He studied Libetta's face. "You look more like her each day," he said.

Libetta saw that her father was old and tired, and her heart ached for him. She started to reach out toward him, but he turned, and she knew that his lack of affection for her was the result of his almost unbearable loss eighteen years ago. Swallowing the fullness in her throat, she said, "I will treasure it always, Father. Thank you."

* * *

That day when she arrived at the sewing table, she opened the small box to show the other maidens her golden needle. "It was a birthday gift from my father," she told them.

"It is gold," Yeve said. "Does it make golden stitches on the cloth?"

The three maidens laughed softly. Thella shook her head. "No, it is a dowsing rod, to point the way to a husband now that you are eighteen. Perhaps a prince - - or perhaps a frog who tried to be a prince and failed?" There was more laughter.

Libetta closed the box and put it back within her sewing supplies. She felt a ragged gash down the center of her heart as she began to sew.

By midmorning, her neck ached and her thimble finger was sore. But she did not look up until the Lady of Good Spells came into the tower room, followed by a youthful, bearded sorcerer.

"This is Aymer, the Illusionist," the Lady said. "He has been chosen to give service to the Prince, who has just returned from the Crusades. Aymer is the country's finest illusionist, and will provide the Prince with superior entertainment." She motioned, and the young sorcerer stepped forward. "Aymer, these are the seamstresses. Explain to them your wishes."

All the while the Lady spoke, Aymer kept staring at Libetta. He continued to look at her as he said, "I require a long black cloak with red velvet lining, black satin breeches, a red scarf to wear at my neck, and a shirt of white silk, all with appropriate pockets. I have here my measurements." He handed a paper to Libetta and smiled at her. She felt a blush rise from her bosom up to her face.

Suddenly Yeve stood. Her voice dripped honey as she opened her palm to Libetta for the paper and said, "I am in charge of all sewing assignments. I will take the paper and make sure your garments are perfectly fitted."

"As you wish," Aymer said, his eyes never leaving Libetta as she handed the measurements to Yeve.

Several pages came into the tower room carrying large bolts of velvet, satin and silk. "Put them there," Yeve directed. She smiled at Aymer. "We will start immediately, and make every effort to please you." She curtsied and returned to her place at the head of the table.

"Thank you," Aymer said, still looking at Libetta. "I look forward to my first fitting."

Even after he and the Lady left the room, Libetta's heart kept fluttering. Was this love? She had never felt this tipsy-turvy when the neighbor farm hands smiled at her, or lingered in her kitchen for a glass of milk.

Joralee and Thella tittered behind their hands. "Well, Libetta," said Yeve, "it seems the Illusionist is taken with you. Perhaps he plans to use you in his act. I've heard that magicians like to turn ugly ducklings into swans for the amusement of their audience, so there is still hope for you. Don't despair!"

All three laughed. Libetta said nothing, but watched as they clustered around the new bolts of cloth and discussed Aymer's measurements without asking her to join them. She went on with her stitching in silence.

* * *

During the days that followed, Thella, Joralee and Yeve worked ceaselessly on Aymer's garments, while Libetta busied herself with the routine sewing. One morning Yeve exclaimed, "My needle has broken! It was worn thin and gave way when I pushed it through the leather waistband of the breeches. Do you have a strong needle, Thella? Joralee?"

Both shook their heads no.

Yeve looked over at Libetta. "Loan me your golden needle, Libetta, that I may complete the waistband."

Libetta seethed. "No! My mother left it to me! It is an heirloom, not to be used, but treasured."

Yeve held out her hand. "Give it here. Or do you want me to tell the Lady that you refused to help in the making of these garments? Do you want Aymer to know you are a selfish,

insolent prig?"

"I am not!" Libetta cried, fetching the needle from her workbasket. "Here! Take it! I hope it pricks your thumb and stabs your palm!"

Yeve smiled as she took the needle. "My, my! Lady's pet is not as sweet as she pretends. She wears an evil streak down her spine that reminds me of a skunk."

Joralee and Thella giggled, while Yeve went back to work on the breeches. Libetta kept her head down, eyes fastened on her sewing so they would not see the tears that stood on her lashes.

When the Lady came in to inspect the day's work, she complimented Libetta, but asked her why she was not working on Aymer's garments. "I am assigned to keep up the regular work," she replied.

"I see." The Lady moved next to Yeve's chair. "Show me your stitches."

Yeve proudly handed the Lady the satin breeches and the white silk shirt. "These are ready for Aymer's fitting," she said.

The Lady sent her page to get the magician. As he arrived, he smiled at Libetta. She dared not smile back for fear her heart would thunder so loudly that all would hear it. Instead, she lowered her eyes to her stitchery. The Lady sat down next to her, and behind her hand she whispered, "Aymer is smitten with you. He wishes to court you. Do you agree?"

Libetta's heart bounced with joy as she nodded yes.

"Here are the first two completed garments," Yeve said, handing Aymer the breeches and shirt. "I'm sure you'll find them measured perfectly, for I supervised the cutting myself. As you can see, my assistants are now working on your cloak." She pointed to Thella and Joralee. "It will be completed soon."

"Thank you," Aymer said as he took the clothing into the fitting chamber and closed the door. Within moments, they heard him cry out, "Ow! Yeee! What devilish trick is this, seamstress?"

"What is wrong?" Yeve called to him.

"This shirt is full of pins, and I am suffering from their puncture wounds."

Yeve's face blanched. "There are no pins in your garments, sir. I personally removed them."

"And these breeches are sewn inside out!" Aymer shouted. "I cannot get them on!" He stormed from the chamber and threw the clothing on the table in front of Yeve. "What is wrong with you, seamstress? What madness is this?"

The Lady picked up the garments, examined them closely. "He is right," she said. "Can you explain these mistakes, Yeve?"

"No! I… I …" she sputtered. Then she shifted her gaze to Libetta and pointed. "She is to blame! She gave me a needle that is defective and does not sew properly."

"May I see that needle?" asked the Lady.

Yeve brought it from her workbasket and handed it over. As the Lady took it, Libetta felt a change in the room's atmosphere- a subtle increase in the brilliance of the sun that slanted through the windows, plus a strange sweetness with an ethereal scent of roses. It was almost as if the needle was greeting the Lady, who gasped as the needle glowed in her palm. "The golden needle! The needle of magic! This is yours, Libetta?"

Libetta swallowed. "Yes, my Lady."

"How did you come by it?"

"It was my mother's. My father gave it to me for my eighteenth birthday."

"Ah." The Lady sat back, watching the needle shimmer in her palm. "And do you know its history?"

"No, my Lady."

"I see. I will tell you later. Right now we must repair Aymer's garments." She lifted the needle close to her face and said, "Sew the garments in good order, oh magic needle, that they will please Aymer and fit him to perfection. This is the wish of your owner, Libetta."

The needle spun away from her palm, and, trailing a thread of gold, darted so rapidly in and out and across the breeches that no eye could follow it. All of a sudden the breeches lay folded neatly on the table with the shirt next to them. The needle flew back into the Lady's palm, and lay there in shining splendor.

"Thank you," said the Lady to the needle. "Aymer, will you now try on your garments?"

"Yes, my Lady." He went into the fitting chamber and in a few minutes reappeared, perfectly attired in his new outfit.

The four sewing maids sat open-mouthed, and Libetta's pulse throbbed. Aymer was so handsome, it was hard for her to breathe normally. When he took a seat near her and smiled, she couldn't help smiling back.

The Lady turned to Libetta and handed her the golden needle. "Keep this safely, for it has great power, not only for stitching, but for making dreams come true."

After Libetta tucked the golden needle back into its box and then into her sewing basket, the Lady spoke again. "Ordinarily, Yeve would be dismissed for her deceitful conduct, but she was as mystified by the inside out breeches as we all were. She was right. It was the needle's doing. But it did this in loyalty to its owner -- Libetta. The golden needle is magic, and has only one purpose. To make everything its owner wishes for come out perfect, while creating disorder and confusion for anyone else who uses it. And how do I know this? Because this needle belonged to my mother and to her mother before her, all the way back to once upon a time. When my mother saw that I would never become a seamstress but would become a full-time High Sorceress, she awarded the needle to a beautiful young woman who sewed with undying loyalty and made the smallest stitches in the world - Libetta's mother."

The Lady stood and looked at Libetta. "Now you know the history of the golden needle, and are aware of its great magical powers." She turned to Yeve. "You will remain as head seamstress, if you promise to avoid jealousy and the belittlement of your associates. Your next encounter with magic may not be as easily negotiated. Agreed?"

Yeve thrust her head down and stared at the floor. "Yes, my Lady. I apologize if I offended anyone." She smiled at Libetta, and her look was sincere.

"Good," the Lady said. "That is all, then. You may each return to your assignments."

The four sewing maids picked up their stitchery, and as he left the room with the Lady, Aymer once again smiled at Libetta.

* * *

That evening at home, after her father left for the tavern and she was alone in her room, Libetta took out the golden needle. It lay in brilliance on the bed of black velvet. "You have such great power," she whispered. "I wish you could tell me what to do about Aymer, for I love him much, and I know he loves me. But he is an Illusionist, who works for the royal family, and if we marry, I must be with him there while my father grows more weary at his chores with each passing day."

Libetta sighed as she looked out her window at the tall spire of the House of High Sorcerers. Was Aymer asleep now, in his room, or did he, too, look out his window, dreaming of her? The stars twinkled above in their little pockets of heaven, and the full moon threw a splotch of ivory light onto the golden needle. "Oh golden needle," Libetta whispered. "I wish to marry Aymer, but I also wish to find a way to help my father with his farming duties. How can I do both?" Then she recalled how the Lady spoke to the needle. Libetta held it in the palm of her hand, close to her face, and said, "Oh magic needle, arrange for my father's chores to be lessened, so that I may marry Aymer with a clear conscience."

The needle grew warm against her palm. Then it suddenly spun away, flew out the window, and disappeared. "Oh, no!" she cried. "What have I done? Please come back!"

She waited a long, long time, but it did not return. Heartbroken, in tears, Libetta climbed into bed. Almost asleep, she heard a loud clamor in the kitchen, a chorus of voices that she seemed to recognize. Listening carefully, she heard her father say, "Yes, she should be told. I will awaken her now." The next moment her father knocked at her door. "Libetta, come into the kitchen. There is wonderful news!"

She found her father, sober, and happier than she had seen him in years, waving a sheaf of papers around, clapping his neighboring farmer and two sons on their backs.

"Libetta!" Jurgen shouted. "I have signed the farm over to our neighbors who need more land, for the young men are marrying soon and wish to farm close to their father. The idea to buy my farm came to them in a dream, spun through with golden threads. When they awoke, they drew up the proper papers. They paid me well, many, many thousand kimmix, and agreed that we may stay living in this cottage for the rest of our lives. I will have a small plot for my own garden, but no longer need slave in the fields. See, it is all written down here." He handed her the papers, then pulled a large bundle of bank notes from his pocket. When he did so, the golden needle fell out also. "How in the world did that get in there?" he asked, picking it up and handing it to Libetta.

"Perhaps I put it there by mistake when I sewed the hole in your breeches," Libetta said. "I will put it away." It glowed warmly in her hand. "Thank you, magic needle," she whispered. "And now, Father," she said, smiling through tear-dewed lashes, "I have something equally important to tell you."

# The End

*Vera Searles has had over three hundred short stories published in the small press, including TALEBONES, THE SILVER WEB, and PENNY DREADFUL. She recently completed a fantasy novel and is working on the sequel.*

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